

Critical Perspective on Bullying in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is often ignored in the field of early childhood education because a number of teachers consider that early childhood has limited cognitive and verbal development and intentions with emotional awareness. Therefore, it seems impossible for children to take negative actions such as bullying. Using post-developmentalism theory, this article attempts to explore the discourse of bullying operates in early childhood. The method used in this research was a literature review with a transformative paradigm which would take a look at critical thoughts about bullying in early childhood in order to produce a better educational transformation. These findings highlight the extent to which discourse of bullying can occur among early childhood and affects children's development at a later stage. These findings also elaborate the complexities encountered by teachers in negotiating fairness and comfort for children to prevent further bullying actions.

Keywords: *Bullying, early childhood education, post developmentalism, learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is often ignored by early childhood educators. A number of academicians, teachers, and practitioners believe that bullying is paradoxical to be done by early childhood. This understanding seems to be based on the assumption that there are limitations to cognitive and verbal development of children and there must not be an intention with the child's emotional awareness to take negative actions such as bullying [1]. Whereas early childhood is conceivable to be engaged in intimidating action in the form of both verbal and physical aggressiveness [2]. According to Rose et al. [3] that the initiation of aggressive behaviour can be seen from the age of 12 months, while the highest level of aggressiveness is at the age of 3 or 4 years. Afterwards, the aggressive behaviour begins to decline.

In addition, the developmentalism approach has long been employed by educators as a reference base in carrying out learning for early childhood. This approach is considered to be able to see children's development gradually so as to produce a fairer concept of understanding. When observing individuals from this concept, the process of individualism and collectivism indirectly becomes one of the basic aspects that educators perform in carrying out learning activities [4]. Such an approach indirectly generates social problems that are deliberately obliterated in early childhood education. As a result, the comfort and justice that is perceived by children in school is considered poor. Yet, according to Gomez-Ortiz & Romera [5], they explained that the lack of a conducive and comfortable school climate for

children, peer relations, and the dynamics of the family environment both in the parenting style and intensive communication between parents and children are one of the determining factors for children to demonstrate bullying behaviour or not.

However, in recent decades, the bullying discourse has begun to be taken into consideration by educators. This is because there existed a number of bullying cases occurring both among adolescents and among early childhood [6]. Numerous academicians and researchers, such as Seo and Shin [7], and Luca et al. [8] argue that providing learning and prevention for bullying is an important and prominent consideration that must be offered to early childhood. This is necessary because a conducive and comfortable school situation for children can have a major influence on the success of the learning process provided by educators. This is also in accordance with the postcolonialism approach where educators must take care of the needs of children and be able to provide fairness for every child [9]. Through this approach, children will feel comfortable in school situations thus children are able to participate in the learning activities provided by the teacher to a maximum extent.

Although the awareness of putting forward bullying issues to early childhood has emerged, research that explores the discourse of bullying in early childhood remains limited [1]. This is because research that discusses bullying in early childhood requires critical analysis to explore children's thoughts and measures that lead to bullying [10]. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the issues of bullying among early childhood. In

particular, this study aims at identifying whether the discourse on bullying can occur at an early age and how the role of teachers is in the discourse on bullying among early childhood.

2. BULLYING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The importance of discussion about bullying in education was initiated and originated in Olweus' research work. Within Olweus' work, it explains how the bullying process occurs in children and how to prevent bullying [11]. Bullying is a negative act committed to someone physically, verbally or cyberbullying over a period of time and over time it can have a negative impact on the mental health of the victim [12], [13], [14], [15], [16]. In the act of bullying, the perpetrator considers the victim to have less power than himself/herself accordingly the victims are treated dreadfully. This power imbalance is obtained due to differences in social status, racial and cultural differences, as well as a lack of empathy and sympathy from the bullying actors [1].

In addition, the perpetrator possesses the ability to influence and control his/her friends to participate in negative actions to participate in bullying the victim [17], [18]. Indeed, it pays special attention to the oppression that is exercised through power relations. It is clear that if it is allowed to continue, the cases of bullying will be identical to the actions of people with a colonial approach where the practice of placing people under their control to achieve certain goals [9]. If these actions are repeated, it will affect the mental health of the victim and have an impact on the child's future development.

This act of bullying remains in question by some early childhood educators, because they still consider the assumption that children still have limited cognitive and verbal development and there must not be an intention with the child's emotional awareness to take negative actions such as demonstrating bullying behaviour [9]. Meanwhile, according to Vlachou et al. [2], they stated that from the age of three or four years, the primary components of moral and emotional awareness as well as empathy and compliance with regulations begin to develop. Therefore, it is possible if early childhood is able to perform bullying both verbally and physically.

Unfortunately, bullying action in early childhood education has not been given much attention. Educators tend to underestimate the aggressive level of early childhood in the classroom and only a few times verbal reprimand which allows the child to increase aggressiveness to attract the attention of the teacher [1]. In fact, bullying in early childhood must be addressed and prevented from developing these negative behaviours.

3. UNDERSTANDING BULLYING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Bullying in early childhood is not only based on the imbalances in physical strength and power between the perpetrator and the victim. It can also be caused by a lack of social skills, both empathy and sympathy, that the perpetrator possesses for the pain experienced by others (victims) [19]. However, unfortunately in the context of early childhood education these days, educators are too focused on children's cognitive development due to demands and encouragement from parents [4]. Consequently, this leads to an impact on the lack of focus of educators in developing other aspects of child development besides cognitive abilities. In addition, educators pay attention tremendously on educational references that employ the developmentalism approach in which children develop according to their age stages.

The Developmentalism approach has been widely used by a number of early childhood educators because it is considered to be able to place children fairly since it is in accordance with the guidelines for the stages of child development. This stage is considered by educators as the most appropriate reference because it is guided by Western theory, in specific, the theory of Piaget and Vygotsky [9]. In fact, if it is observed comprehensively in the real-life context, the approach is not necessarily suitable to be applied in the global south. This is because the culture between the global north and the global south is not identical. Unfortunately, the current education is still too concentrated on the developmentalism concept and understanding, therefore, there is no learning that concerns understanding bullying for early childhood.

This paper employs a post-developmentalism approach to identify the meaning of child development by not using the traditional notion of developmentalism [20]. Educators must not only concern about children's cognitive development, but also put a proportional concern on all aspects of child development, including social aspects. Social development also plays an important aspect in the upcoming child's life phase, because it affects how to socialize properly in the community. In line with the opinion of Guirguis [21], Kocer & Akduman [22], and Eweniyi & Ometere [23] which explains that children should develop their social skills accordingly they are able to be accepted in a social or community context.

If children acquire inadequate social skill development, it will further inflict social problems including bullying action. When the children begin to get involved with such aggressive and negative behaviour, indeed, the children will be accustomed to perform any actions that tend to violate common norms and rules [24]. As a consequence, the community around the children will be irritated and displeased with the behaviour demonstrated. Furthermore, according to Douvlos [1],

when we as an adult, improve children's social skills and ability in managing their behaviour, it further prevents them from being involved in bullying actions.

The impact of bullying is also perceived by the victims. The continuous mental stress experienced and perceived by the victim causes all aspects of child development to be disrupted. This is due to the reduced comfort and convenience perceived by children when they are at school. If the teacher cannot identify and solve the victim's problems, then the child will tend to be half-hearted and passionless to go to school and often skip classes [13]. Indirectly, this reduces the success of the teacher in providing learning program objectives for children and will certainly affect the upcoming child's life stages. In line with the opinion of Gaffney et al. [25], they explain that bullying in childhood is significantly related to the dropout rate of children in the future.

The role of teachers is the primary and foremost aspect in preventing bullying among early childhood. Educators should not only be concerned with the aspects of children's cognitive development, but also the entire aspects of child development. It is important for children to be introduced to an understanding of bullying, physical strength, and intentions to harm others [10]. Therefore, educators must understand the likelihood of bullying that is possible to be occurring in early childhood. Therefore, it is expected that educators will be able to provide bullying prevention programs without relying on the idea of developmentalism. Educators should start looking for innovative learning processes that intervene in bullying prevention programs in early childhood.

4. CONCLUSION

Bullying is a negative action that can lead to mental health problems in others. Schools are the places where bullying occurs most frequently, including early childhood education. However, unfortunately, a number of educators underestimate and neglect the issues of bullying since they still think that it is impossible for a young child to bully another child because they are considered to have limited cognitive, verbal and emotional intentions to do this negative behaviour. In fact, the emotional and social stages of childhood in understanding good and bad actions and obeying the rules can be understood by children from an early age.

The role of educators is a very influential component in preventing and overcoming bullying that occurs in early childhood. Educators should not concern only on children's cognitive development and observe that children develop abilities according to their age stages, by taking into account the developmentalism approach. However, other developmental components also play an important role, particularly children's socio-emotional abilities, because socio-emotional ability is one of the initial components for children in dealing with the

community environment, including the norms and customs of the surrounding environment. In addition, the development of children's social skills also affects the ability to interact with others, including peers. Through these skills, children are expected to be able to avoid bullying, particularly at an early age. Educators are expected to be able to interpret the understanding of bullying in children in learning programs at school.

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