



Bullying behavior in non-formal education through sport: does the problem exist?

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Abstract

Non-formal education is an organized activity, with a learning goal in mind, that occurs outside of the formal education system. It is defined by the creation of more flexible educational environments, the development of more caring and less hierarchical interactions, and the goal of meeting the needs of participants. Sport programmes are a popular form of non-formal education, often used to improve students' personhood. However, sport, as a reflection of society, can, like any other social activity, have a number of negative consequences. One of them is bullying behavior among students. In this context, the aim is to analyse research findings related to the expression of bullying in non-formal education through sport. This analysis is prepared by using the methods of analysis, interpretation and generalization of scientific literature on the topic of the research. The results of the studies revealed that students participating in non-formal education through sport are not protected from encountering bullying victimization. Although the lack of such studies is noted, the results of published studies show a different prevalence of bullying victimization depending on the cultural context, sport type, age or gender of the students. The various consequences of bullying for the health and well-being of those who experience it are also noted.

Keywords: Non-formal education, sport, bullying

1. Introduction

Non-formal education is an organized activity, with a learning goal in mind, that occurs outside the formal education system. Its purpose is defined in the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania [1], where it is related to the systematically developed knowledge in a certain field, the strengthening of specific abilities and skills, and the additional competencies provided to a person. The latter, due to the social and experiential nature of non-formal education, helps the child to reveal themselves and their talents, allows expressing themselves, forms the needs of a young person, allows children and adolescents to get involved in community life, has a purposeful impact on the socialization of students, helps to solve social problems. Non-formal education meets the need for communication with peers and teachers more effectively, as well as the needs of students of different ages, involved in organized leisure [2-4].

One of the most popular forms of non-formal education is sport programs. They create more flexible learning spaces, more caring, and less hierarchical relationships prevail, thanks to which coaches can use sports activities for various purposes – both by building trust in others, and teamwork skills [5] and by minimizing the problems in social risk situations [6]. However, sport, as a reflection of society, can, like any other social activity, have several negative consequences. One of them, especially evident in formal education, is bullying behavior among students [7].

Bullying is a recognized global problem in interpersonal relationships, leading to a growing interest in it from researchers, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers. However, despite the wealth of research and published results, efforts are still being made to better understand the nature and prevalence of bullying and to deal with it effectively in a variety of contexts. Despite the growing efforts of scientists, the lack of a universal definition of bullying remains a number of challenges.

There are many concepts of bullying in the scientific literature. Still, most of them describe school bullying. However, even in this context, they are not understood and defined differently by researchers, education policymakers, teachers, students, and their parents. The definitions in the legislation also differ [8]. But in spite of that, Dan Olweus contributed the most to the definition of bullying, as more than half of the researchers analyzing bullying, uses the definition which states that "... bullying behavior can be defined as intentional, repeated negative (unpleasant or hurtful) behavior by one or more persons directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or



herself” [9, p.352]. However, with the growing awareness of the phenomenon of bullying and its nature, many scholars are trying to expand, explain, or change existing definitions. Nevertheless, the vast majority of existing definitions describe bullying regarding these criteria: repetition, intention to harm, power inequity, and provocation, although ongoing discussions on the relevance and practical application of each criterion are still unavoidable [10].

Developed different approaches and different scientific discussions, as well as different school bullying assessment methodologies, result in a lack of objectivity in determining their prevalence and expression among school-age children. This is well illustrated by the prevalence of bullying in various studies, which ranges from 7 to 75 percent [11]. Unfortunately, the inconsistency of such research data may also lead to insufficient attention being paid to them. Even recognizing bullying as a serious problem, which leads to negative short-term and long-term consequences, such as poor school performance, physical health problems, illicit drug use, and abuse, anxiety, depression, and even suicide [12], the low prevalence in the population identified in the studies does not allow for a timely response and prompt resolution of the problem [13].

The context of sport is no exception, and bullying, despite a lack of research, has become an increasingly important topic of debate over the last decade [14]. Here, as in other contexts, a common, universally accepted definition is still being discussed [15], and the lack of research, the different approaches used by researchers, and the different instruments do not form a complete bullying image and do not allow an objective understanding of the sport bullying phenomenon [16]. The problem is exacerbated by the existing attitude that there is no bullying in separate sports and teams [14].

Research in recent years is changing this attitude. The phenomenon of bullying in different sports is becoming more and more common, and it is established that athletes of all skill levels and gender face bullying. Several studies have shown that competition in sports can encourage and increase peer aggression, which often leads to bullying [17]. However, the research found is usually done by questioning adult athletes. This does not provide a complete picture of bullying in non-formal education in sports, all the more so as selection, teaming, competition and the desire to win in sports for school-age children and young people can lead to aggressive behavior [18].

The thoughts expressed raise the question - is there bullying in non-formal education through sport and what is its prevalence in the studies? In this context, the study aims to analyze research findings related to the expression of bullying in non-formal education through sport.

2. Research Methods

This analysis is prepared by using the methods of analysis, interpretation, and generalization of scientific literature on the topic of the research. The search for scientific literature was carried out in January-March 2022, using SCOPUS and EBSCO databases. Freely available sources in English and Lithuanian were selected using the keywords “sport”, “bullying”, and “sport bullying” revealing the topic. Due to the lack of research, the literature was focused on sources not older than 20 years. During the search, the results of 9 scientific sources were selected and analyzed, stating the prevalence of bullying in non-formal education through sport.

3. Research Results

Many studies carried out internationally have confirmed the current lack of research on the prevalence of bullying in sports, and in particular on bullying in non-formal education through sport. And although it is said that participation in sports buffers against the effects of bullying [19], sparse research conducted in various countries reveals that bullying victimization exists in the context of non-formal education through sport (table 1).

Table 1. Review of research on bullying experienced by students in non-formal education through sport (2002-2022)

Authors	Country	Characteristics of the subjects			Reported having been victimized
		Age	Gender	Sports	



Marracho et al., 2021 [20]	Portugal	13-18	Male Female	various sports	23.6% of school sports athletes 25,6% of federated sports athletes 26.7% of team sports athletes 19.1% of individual sports athletes 23.1% of combat sports athletes
Holbrook et al., 2020 [19]	Italy	13-20	Male Female	various sports	17.0 % of males athletes 21.5 % of females athletes
Nery et al., 2018 [21]	Portugal	6-18	Male	various sports	10% of athletes
Vveinhardt et al., 2017 [22]	Lithuania	14-18	Male	basketball	27,3% of athletes
Evans et al., 2016 [17]	Canada	13-17	Male Female	various sports	14% of athletes
Steinfeldt et al., 2012 [23]	USA	14-18	Male	football	31.0 % of athletes (Physical Bullying) 26,0 % of athletes (Verbal Bullying) 55,0 % of athletes (Social Bullying)
Tilindienė et al., 2010 [24]	Lithuania	12-15	Male Female	various sports	50% of females athletes 41,54% of males athletes
Volk, Lagzdins, 2009 [25]	Canada	12-15	Female	various sports	30% of athletes
Tilindienė et al., 2008 [26]	Lithuania	12-15	Male Female	various sports	66% of athletes

The analysis of the research results revealed that the prevalence of bullying in non-formal education through sport in various groups can vary from 10 to 66 percent. It should also be noted that the experiences of athletes of different genders, sports, and countries related to bullying vary. Based on school research data, it can be assumed that encountering bullying in this context can not only predict the victimization of bullying in other contexts but also lead to various negative consequences that have a long-term impact on their mental health and well-being. This is confirmed by these studies, which revealed that bullying mainly caused negative feelings in the victims [20], depression symptoms [19], average or low self-esteem [24].

Conclusion

The results of the studies revealed that students participating in non-formal education through sport are not protected from encountering bullying victimization. Although the lack of such studies is noted, the results of published studies show a different prevalence of bullying victimization depending on the cultural context, sport type, age or gender of the students. The various consequences of bullying for the health and well-being of those who experience it are also noted. Therefore, the problem of bullying remains relevant, requiring ongoing research and the search for effective prevention programs

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