

THE IMPACT OF BULLYING ON STUDENTS' EMOTIONS, PEER RELATIONSHIPS, AND SCHOOL ABSENCE

IVONA SHUSHAK LOZANOVSKA, ICE ILIJEVSKI,
ANGELINA STANOJOSKA

University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, Faculty of law, North Macedonia
ivona.susak@uklo.edu.mk, ilijevski@uklo.edu.mk,
angelina.stanojoska@uklo.edu.mk

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

ivona.susak@uklo.edu.mk

Abstract Peer violence, commonly conceptualized as bullying, constitutes a pervasive challenge affecting students both globally and within North Macedonia. Beyond its immediate psychological and emotional impact on victims, bullying shapes the overall school climate, influencing students' safety, inclusion, and well-being. Victimization is associated with elevated fear, social withdrawal, and disrupted peer relationships, which can reinforce cycles of aggression. Empirical analyses indicate that supportive peer interactions reduce the likelihood of being targeted. The study further highlights that awareness of bullying and students' emotional experiences are crucial for understanding the dynamics of peer victimization. These findings underscore the multifactorial and systemic nature of bullying and emphasize the importance of promoting resilience and fostering positive peer relations to ensure a safe, inclusive, and supportive educational environment.

Keywords

peer victimization,
peer connectedness,
school satisfaction,
well-being,
school climate

1 Introduction

Peer violence, commonly referred to as bullying, is a complex social phenomenon posing a serious challenge to contemporary educational systems, considering that an estimated 130 million students aged 13 to 15, over one-third of this age group, experience some form of bullying worldwide (UNICEF, 2017). It is a repeated and deliberate pattern of aggressive or hurtful behavior targeting individuals perceived as less powerful. Bullying manifests in various forms, such as physical, verbal, social/relational, and cyberbullying, each with unique characteristics (Daley et al., 2023). Of particular concern is the fact that bullying knows no borders – it occurs in urban and rural areas, in small and large schools, regardless of ethnic, social or cultural affiliation. The problem is global, but its consequences are local and personal, significantly impacting students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and social development (Jumra et al., 2025).

Previously, it was believed that bullying was an integral part of growing up and that such experience could help children become stronger (Puharić et al., 2014). However, modern research and expert observations clearly indicate that peer violence is not a harmless phenomenon, nor does it necessarily contribute to positive personal development (UNICEF, 2017). On the contrary, in recent decades, the scientific and professional community has been alarmed by the increasing intensity and complexity of peer violence, particularly in the context of new technologies and social networks, which have become a 'vector for youth violence' and have dramatically transformed the landscape of aggressive behavior (Peterson et al., 2017).

Peer relationships, involvement in violence and satisfaction with school affect the quality of life and well-being of children daily. School satisfaction, which refers to students' subjective perception of their well-being and overall experience at school, including feelings of happiness, contentment, and acceptance, is one of the key outcomes potentially impacted by peer victimization. Available knowledge and findings of previous research show that children exposed to violence at school suffer various negative consequences in multiple dimensions of their school life, such as a diminution in overall school satisfaction. Additionally, students that are subjected to violence at school and on the Internet report worse school performance and lower

attachment to school. Victimization also has a significant negative effect on students' happiness (Pakšić et al., 2025).

The breakdown of peer relationships, particularly through bullying behaviors, is also recognized in the scientific literature on children and adolescents as a threat to student well-being, producing both immediate and long-term effects (Boyle et al., 2025). Positive and continuous connections can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of peer victimization, whereas disrupted or weak relationships often result from exposure to bullying and can further exacerbate feelings of loneliness and reduced school satisfaction.

The goal of this research is to examine the relationship between peer victimization and its effects on students' school satisfaction and peer relations, in order to understand how exposure to bullying influences students' emotional well-being and the quality of their social interactions within the school environment. It is hypothesized that students who are victims of bullying do not experience positive emotional feelings at school, have less stable and less frequent interactions with their peers, and are more likely to be absent from school compared to students who are not exposed to peer violence.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Bullying and gangs in schools are nothing new. Most people remember being targeted by their peers in childhood. Such experiences, although painful and embarrassing, are integral to social development. But for some children, being bullied by their peers is no accident. Rather, it is a constant source of frustration and fear, a never-ending battle that colors their entire experience of growing up (Landfield, 2006).

Peer violence should not be equated with ordinary conflicts between peers but should be treated as a serious social and psychological problem that requires a systemic approach to recognition, control and intervention. A conflict between two equally powerful opponents is usually not considered bullying (Buljan Flander, 2004). According to Olweus, 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" (Olweus, 2010).

Despite agreement on the basic elements that define it, there are still numerous definitions to explain this phenomenon. However, the definition of bullying proposed by UNESCO in 2023 is considered inclusive and comprehensive, emphasizing the complexity of this phenomenon and the need for a holistic approach. According to this definition: “School bullying is a damaging social process that is characterized by an imbalance of power driven by social (societal) and institutional norms. It is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behavior among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community” (UNESCO, 2024).

In the scholarly literature, bullying behavior is most commonly classified as verbal and non-verbal, and may manifest through physical injury, damage to property, or psychological harm, such as intimidation, humiliation, and social isolation, as well as sexual harassment, which may include unwanted sexual comments, gestures, or physical contact (Markovic, 2020; Iljevski et al., 2023). Recently, researchers have adopted the means of expression as a key criterion for classifying peer violence, distinguishing between classical and electronic forms (Popadić, 2009). Nevertheless, regardless of where violence occurs, according to Košir (2013), two forms of peer violence can be roughly distinguished. The first is direct peer violence, which involves physical and verbal violence (strikes, kicks, taking property, insults, threats, and similar). The second form is called indirect peer violence, characterized by manipulating friendships to harm others through behaviors such as social exclusion and spreading of rumors or lies about an individual (Zobec et al., 2023).

Both boys and girls are vulnerable to being bullied, although some studies suggest that boys experience more physical bullying (being hit, having belongings taken), and girls experience more relational or social bullying (such as spreading of sexual rumors or other forms of sexual harassment or being systematically excluded from friendship groups). In addition, verbal bullying (nasty forms of taunting or teasing, threats) is experienced commonly by both genders in school (Schafer et al., 2004; Stanojoska et al., 2024).

Many researchers have shown that bullying is not an isolated problem, exclusive of certain countries or cultures. On the contrary, it is widely extended in societies worldwide. According to recent data, approximately one in three students aged 11

to 15 in the European Union has experienced some form of bullying or violence in school over the past year. The prevalence of this phenomenon varies across countries, ranging from 15% in countries such as Finland and Sweden to approximately 35% in Bulgaria and Romania (Neubauer et al., 2025). Prevalence of bullying ranges between 10–33% of U.S. students with 5–13% admitting to bullying others, and 50–70% of adolescent students having witnessed bullying in some context (Soto et al, 2025). Similarly alarming patterns are evident in Australia, where the impact of bullying and other harmful behaviors on children and young people has reached devastating proportions, with approximately one in four Year 4 to Year 9 Australian students (27%) having reported being bullied every few weeks or more often (Department of Education, 2025). Relevant data on representative samples show that peer violence is widespread among students in North Macedonia. The Health Behavior of School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey is one of the largest international surveys involving children. Under the HBSC, data is collected every four years, on nationally representative samples of 11, 13 and 15-year-old students. A newly released national report has revealed alarming levels of peer violence among school-aged children in North Macedonia, with one in ten students reporting regular bullying at school at least two to three times a month and one in six experiencing cyberbullying (Cvetanoska et al., 2025).

Bullying can be associated not only with physical consequences but also with significant long-term psychological and social impairments. Peer violence is associated with emotional distress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, psychosomatic complaints, and self-harm/suicidal thoughts, and in some adolescents, substance use (Hong et al., 2019). Attention deficit disorders, decreased academic motivation, and school avoidance behavior are also common (Espelage & Holt, 2013).

Being victimized by peers, appears to encourage anxious-withdrawal behaviors, which in turn may impact on the opportunities youths have to interact within the peer group and develop significant relationships. The most frequently cited motivation for victimization is that the victims “did not fit in”. Thus, it is understandable that many victimized children and adolescents report experiencing elevated levels of loneliness. Furthermore, it has been argued that a perceived lack of control over peers’ aggressive behavior may lead to increased feelings of loneliness and unhappiness. Victims of peer maltreatment report feeling lonelier, less

happy, and having fewer close friends at school than their peers (Almeida et al., 2021). Concurrently, others may avoid victims for fear of being bullied themselves or losing social status among their peers. Although victims respond in various ways to bullying, avoidance behaviors (such as not going to school and refusing to go to certain places) are also common (Veenstra et al., 2005).

All of these statements are supported and confirmed by relevant research studies, including a study conducted in Thailand in 2017 on a sample of 7,825 students, which found that victimized students were 28% less likely to be happy, indicating that bullying victimization has a significant negative effect on students' happiness (Aunampai et al., 2022).

A study conducted on a sample of 5,823 students in Denmark demonstrated a strong and graded association between loneliness and exposure to bullying. Even students with low exposure to bullying (once or twice in the past couple of months) showed significantly elevated odds of loneliness compared to non-exposed students. Students exposed to bullying at school several times a week were 11.5 times more likely to experience loneliness than those who were not exposed (Madsen et al., 2024). In Spain, a sample of 1,239 participants revealed that chronic victims of bullying consistently exhibited the lowest levels of social preference, perceived popularity, and friendship over time. The persistently low levels of social status and friendship highlight the rejection and isolation that chronic victims experience from their classmates (Romera et al., 2020).

Many studies also document that peer victimization can negatively impact engagement and success in school, while also increasing school absenteeism and other avoidance behaviors. Such results were also obtained from a study conducted with 1,815 students from 12 elementary schools in one school district that included both urban and suburban areas of a mid-Atlantic state in the USA. The study showed that unexcused absences from school were positively related to peer victimization, $r(1749) = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$ (Meehan, 2023).

The findings are also confirmed by the analysis of surveys collected from nationally representative samples of a total of 113,200 students from 25 countries, which again showed that victims of bullying reported poorer emotional adjustment and weaker relationships with classmates. Victimized students were often marginalized from the

main peer group, which limits their access to prosocial peers who could serve as positive role models for appropriate social skills and provide protection against bullying. Therefore, regardless of the underlying mechanism, involvement in bullying is consistently found to be negatively associated with multiple aspects of school functioning (Nansel et al., 2004).

Drawing on the reviewed literature, which highlights the consistent negative effects of bullying on children's emotional well-being and peer relationships, the present study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the psychosocial consequences of bullying within the local school context in Bitola.

3 Methodological Framework

We conducted our research process from December 2024 to March 2025. To fulfill the set objectives of the research, we used a survey questionnaire which participants accessed by scanning a QR code, while we carried out data collection and processing using the digital platform SurveyMonkey, which enabled the research to be administered efficiently and precisely.

The research sample included a total of 608 participants. The sample demonstrated an approximately balanced gender distribution, comprising 52.07% male students and 47.93% female students.

Furthermore, the sample included an equal number of participants from all schools in the city of Bitola, with thirty-two students from each school.

The distribution of respondents by grades and classes indicates a dominance of students from primary education. The largest proportion of respondents comes from the 8th grade (31.51%) and 9th grade (32.01%), which together comprise 63.52% of the total sample.¹ The remaining 36.48% are secondary school students. These students come from a total of seven secondary schools, with 64 students from the two general high schools, while the rest are from a total of five vocational

¹ This distribution corresponds to the fact that in the city of Bitola there are almost twice as many primary schools as secondary schools. This uneven institutional distribution logically leads to a higher number of primary school students being included in the research.

schools. A roughly equal representation of respondents is ensured from each school and from each grade, from the first to the fourth year.

This distribution corresponds to the age structure of the participants, with a predominance of students aged 12 to 14 years. This distribution reflects the institutional structure of education in the city of Bitola, where the number of primary schools is almost double that of secondary schools. This unequal institutional distribution logically resulted in a higher inclusion of primary school students in the research sample.

We selected students randomly, without intervention or recommendations. For example, we selected a certain class or grade according to the specific day of the survey, and we selected students according to the ordinal number in the diary (for example, odd numbers). If it was necessary to select a student of a certain gender and the next number in the diary did not match, the selection of the first next student of the desired gender was continued.

Namely, the random selection of students minimizes the risk of bias, providing an equal chance for inclusion of each student, regardless of individual characteristics. On the other hand, the even distribution according to educational levels, gender and age groups enabled us to cover different segments of the student population, which helped to ensure the validity and integrity of our results.

The survey questionnaire consists of 47 (forty-seven) semi-open and open-ended questions, divided into six sections: the demographic characteristics of the respondents, recognition of bullying, respondents' personal experiences (their potential victimization), the emergence of negative emotions resulting from experienced bullying, as well as their reactions and existing prevention methods. Data processing combined descriptive statistical analysis of the data from the survey questionnaires answered through the use of a software solution for statistical data processing (SPSS). The study applied the χ^2 (Chi-square) test, correlation analysis, and regression analysis (multiple and simple), with statistical significance determined at the level of $p < 0.05$.

4 Results and Discussion

The fact that peer violence is a serious problem in the Municipality of Bitola is evidenced by the findings, which reveal a concerning 33.78% of students report that violence occurs within their schools. Out of 596 students who answered the question, 156 students or 26.2% identified themselves as victims of bullying, while 45 of them were unsure if they had ever been victimized. The results show that the majority of students (41%) were rarely victims of violence, while 27.6% stated it happened to them several times a week. It is concerning that 17.3% were victims on a daily basis and 14.1% once a week, indicating serious and repetitive victimization among a significant portion of the respondents.

Table 1: Personal victimization (victims of violence) by gender

		Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?			Total
		Yes	No	I don't know	
Sex	Male	71	221	18	310
	Female	85	174	27	286
Total		156	395	45	596

Table 2: Chi-square test: Personal victimization by gender

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.617 ^a	3	.035
Likelihood Ratio	9.015	3	.029
Linear-by-Linear Association	.326	1	.568
N of Valid Cases	596		

a. 2 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .48.

Analysis of the data also shows gender-based differences in victimization. Females were victimized at a higher rate (85 out of 286) than males (71 out of 310), a result that is statistically significant (Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2 = 8.617$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.035$)

Of the victims of peer violence, nearly half reported experiencing emotional stress, anxiety, reduced self-confidence, and self-esteem. A smaller portion indicated that the violence negatively affected their academic performance (14.10%) and physical health (12.82%), while 25.64% reported feeling social isolation. Particularly alarming is the fact that nearly 20% of the victims experienced thoughts of self-harm and

suicidal ideation, highlighting the profound psychological consequences that can result from bullying.

Table 3: Personal victimization by emotional state at school

		<i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>			Total
		Yes	No	I don't know	
<i>How do you feel at school?</i>	Other	18	20	5	43
	Happy	112	353	34	499
	Sad	9	10	1	20
	Lonely	12	4	3	19
	Scared	5	8	2	15
Total		156	395	45	596

Table 4: Chi-square test: Personal victimization by emotional state at school

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	34.552 ^a	8	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.588	8	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.443	1	.230
N of Valid Cases	596		
a. 6 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.13.			

The cross-tabulation and Chi-square (χ^2) test from the tables above indicate that students who have been victims of peer violence at school feel happy less frequently, and more often feel lonely, sad, fearful, or 'other' (likely negative emotions), compared to their peers who have not had such experiences. Approximately 90% of children who were not victims reported feeling happy at school, while this percentage was about 20% lower among victims.

The Pearson Chi-square test is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 34.552$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$), indicating that the differences in the distribution of emotional states between victims and non-victims are not due to chance. Specifically, there is a significant association between victimization and emotional well-being at school.

We can draw similar conclusions from the responses to the question of whether students have ever been absent from school due to fear or shame caused by their peers. While 93.6% of students who had not been victimized reported that they never missed school due to fear or shame, 27% of victimized students indicated that they sometimes or often avoided school for these reasons.

The findings are further supported by the results of the linear regression presented in Table 5, which, although explaining only 1.6% of the variance, still indicate that victimization from bullying is a significant predictor of school absence.

Table 5: ANOVA results for the regression model: Victimization as a predictor of school absence

ANOVA ^a						
	Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.328	1	3.328	9.786	.002 ^b
	Residual	202.331	595	.340		
	Total	205.658	596			
a. Dependent Variable: <i>Absence from school due to fear or shame</i>						
b. Predictors: (Constant), <i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>						

The study also considered students' victimization in relation to peer relations.²

Table 6: Correlation of victimization and relations with peers

Correlations			
		<i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>	Peer relationship
Pearson Correlation	<i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>	1.000	-.178
	Peer relationship	-.178	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	<i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>	.	.000
	Peer relationship	.000	.
N	<i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>	595	595
	Peer relationship	595	595

Table 7: ANOVA results for the regression model: peer relationships as a predictor of victimization

ANOVA ^a						
	Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5.686	1	5.686	19.311	.000 ^b
	Residual	174.606	593	.294		
	Total	180.292	594			
a. Dependent Variable: <i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Peer relationship						

² Students rated their relationships with classmates on a scale from 1 to 5.

Table 8: Regression coefficients of the model: peer relationships as a predictor of victimization

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.007	.049		40.740	.000
	Peer relationship	-.113	.026	-.178	-4.394	.000
a. Dependent Variable: <i>Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?</i>						

Correlation analysis shows a negative relationship between victimization and the relationship with peers ($r = -0.178$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students with better relationships with their peers are less likely to be victims of peer violence. Regression results further confirm that the relationship with peers is a significant predictor of victimization. The model is statistically significant ($F = 19.311$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that the relationship with classmates as a predictor is important and is not a chance finding. The regression coefficient for the relationship with classmates is -0.113 ($Beta = -0.178$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that better relationships with classmates reduce the risk of being a victim of violence.

The following tables reflect our findings on the relationship between victimization and the frequency of social interactions among students (i.e., how often they socialize).

Table 9: Personal victimization according to students' friendship with peers

		Have you ever been a victim of violence at school (bullying)?			Total
		Yes	No	I don't know	
<i>Relationships with peers</i>	Often	112	341	33	486
	Sometimes	30	40	6	76
	Rarely	12	10	3	25
	I don't spend time with peers	2	3	1	6
Total		156	394	43	593

Table 10: χ^2 test: Relationship between victimization and friendship with peers

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	613.358 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.904	12	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.915	1	.048
N of Valid Cases	593		
a. 12 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .00.			

Table 11: Relationship between victimization and friendship with peers

Symmetric Measures					
		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.081	.050	-1.983	.048 ^c
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	-.109	.048	-2.669	.008 ^c
N of Valid Cases		594			
a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.					
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.					
c. Based on normal approximation.					

The most common form of social connection, 'I often socialize with children from my class,' is significantly more pronounced among students who were not victims of violence than among victims, with a difference of approximately 14.7%. Among victims, instead of regular socialization, responses in the categories 'sometimes' (19.2% vs. 10.2% among non-victims) and 'rarely' (7.7% vs. 2.5%) are more frequent. These differences clearly indicate that students exposed to violence have less stable and frequent peer contacts.

Statistical tests confirm this connection: Pearson χ^2 with $p < .001$ indicates a significant association between victimization and the intensity of socialization. Additionally, symmetric measures show a small but statistically significant negative correlation (Pearson $R = -0.08$, $p = .048$; Spearman $\rho = -0.11$, $p = .008$), meaning that more intensive friendship relations are associated with a reduced risk of victimization.

This confirms the finding that peer violence leads to a significant disruption of social ties, victims socialize less frequently and are lonelier within the group, which is an important risk factor for children's psychosocial health.

The aim of this study was to examine the emotional well-being of students in primary and secondary schools in the Municipality city of Bitola who identify themselves as victims of peer violence, as well as to determine whether such victimization leads to changes in peer relationships and their dynamics. Additionally, the research aims to determine whether peer violence is a factor contributing to increased student absenteeism from school.

Students who have been victims of peer violence at school reported feeling happy less frequently and more often experience feelings of loneliness, sadness, fear, or other predominantly negative emotions compared to their peers who have not had such experiences. Previous research has consistently shown that adolescents who experience bullying victimization are at a significantly higher risk of developing various mental health problems, including loneliness, anxiety, depression and lower levels of happiness (Ye et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2020; Bernasco et al., 2022; Gomez-Baya et al., 2022).

Feelings of loneliness and unhappiness are also directly linked to disrupted social contacts. In line with our findings, students who experience victimization tend to have less stable and less frequent peer relationships, which increases their vulnerability. Results from other studies also reveal that victimization contributes to increases in peer rejection and low peer acceptance in preadolescence and adolescence (Hodges et al., 1999; Maneiro et al., 2023; Kochel et al., 2012).

The results also showed that victimized students often or sometimes avoid attending school due to fear or embarrassment from their peers. Our findings are consistent with prior studies that showed risk associations between having been bullied and missing school (Beran & Li, 2007; Dake et al., 2003; Steiner et al., 2022).

General strain theory (Agnew, 1992) suggests that bullying victimization introduces negatively valued/noxious stimuli into the victim's life, which in turn creates intense levels of stress or strain. The youth who experience these stressors then require a means of coping. Although children may rely on adaptive methods, such as seeking

help from a trusted adult, coping strategies may also manifest as maladaptive behaviors. Specifically, victimized children may attempt to escape from future victimization by avoiding peers, school or the classroom (Torres et al., 2020). However, this can lead to further social isolation and deterioration of emotional well-being, through the emergence of depression and anxiety, poor academic performance and school dropout. Accordingly, it is imperative to find methods to deal with these effects in order to reduce the frequency of this problem (Sobba, 2019).

The school is the agent responsible for socializing groups of children and young people on specific skills and values in society (Saldana, 2013). Unfortunately, the bullying problem turns school into a source of stress and pain for student victims, instead of a space of safety and belonging. Research shows that the negative effects of victimization often extend far beyond childhood. Victimized children tend to achieve long-term psychological difficulties, lower educational qualifications, experience greater difficulties in financial management, and earn less than their peers in later adulthood (Wolke et al., 2015). In addition to these economic consequences, victims frequently report long-term social difficulties, including problems with making or maintaining friendships. They are also less likely to live with a partner and often lack strong social support networks (Armitage et al., 2023).

Limitations

Whereas the sample in the present study is locally representative, covering all primary and secondary schools in the Municipality of Bitola, it is not representative of the national population. All data were based on self-report, which may introduce bias, as participants could underreport or overreport their experiences. However, because our study ensured confidentiality and anonymity, self-report measures are generally considered reliable and valid (Sigurdson et al., 2015). Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal conclusions, and a larger, more diverse sample would improve external validity and increase statistical power to detect significant effects.

Implications

The results highlight the complexity of the problem at the local level, emphasizing that the consequences of victimization are not always immediately visible. While physical effects may subside over time, psychosocial consequences often persist, potentially affecting the long-term well-being of victimized individuals. These findings should encourage stakeholders at both local and national levels to prioritize the creation of safe and supportive school environments, where schools are recognized once again as spaces for learning, social connection, and personal development.

Additionally, despite the local nature of the sample, the present findings align with results from large-scale longitudinal studies conducted in major cities and countries worldwide. This correspondence supports the notion that the observed patterns may reflect broader, potentially universal trends, providing a basis for cautiously extrapolating the conclusions beyond the immediate study context.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Bullying is a widespread global issue, with serious consequences for victimized individuals. Victims are the target of physical, verbal, relational, or psychological aggression carried out by some of their classmates with the aim of causing them harm. Therefore, based on the findings of previous literature, peer victimization is a stressor that could adversely impact the psychosocial functioning and adjustment of students as well as the physical and mental health of these individuals.

The results of the present study demonstrated that victims of bullying do not experience positive emotional feelings within the school environment and that students exposed to violence also have less stable and less frequent peer interactions. The findings highlight the complexity of the issue at the local level and resonate with international research, suggesting that these patterns may reflect broader trends.

Although the present study focuses on current attitudes and experiences, longitudinal research indicates that these seemingly invisible consequences leave lasting traces in the later lives of victimized individuals. However, research shows that peer victimization is considered a modifying risk factor (Moore et al., 2017).

For this reason, the issue of bullying should be approached with a high level of seriousness, according to the fact that prevention is not only an ethical task, but also a necessary condition for creating a safe and supportive educational environment.

Schools should adopt a comprehensive prevention framework that incorporates primary, secondary, and tertiary strategies. Primary (universal) prevention programs should aim to reduce risks and strengthen social, emotional, and behavioral skills for all students within the school, enhancing overall school climate and awareness about bullying (Rivara et al., 2016). Secondary prevention should strive to identify at-risk students or classrooms early and to provide timely interventions to prevent escalation and repetition of victimization. Tertiary interventions should offer personalized support and rehabilitative services for victims, helping to reduce long-term harm and vulnerability (Edmondson et al., 2011).

This consistent and comprehensive approach would demonstrate the resolve to tackle the insidious harms caused by bullying.

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Povzetek v slovenskem jeziku

Nasilje med vrstniki, ki se običajno pojmuje kot ustrahovanje, predstavlja razširjen izziv, ki prizadene učence po vsem svetu kot tudi v Severni Makedoniji. Poleg neposrednega psihološkega in čustvenega vpliva na žrtve ustrahovanje oblikuje splošno šolsko klimo ter vpliva na varnost, vključenost in dobro počutje učencev. Viktimizacija je povezana s povečanim strahom, socialnim umikom in motenimi odnosi z vrstniki, kar lahko okrepi cikle agresije. Empirične analize kažejo, da podporne interakcije z vrstniki zmanjšujejo verjetnost, da bo nekdo postal žrtev ustrahovanja. Študija nadalje poudarja, da sta ozaveščenost o ustrahovanju in čustvene izkušnje učencev ključnega pomena za razumevanje dinamike viktimizacije med vrstniki. Ti izsledki poudarjajo večfaktorsko in sistemsko naravo ustrahovanja ter pomen spodbujanja odpornosti in negovanja pozitivnih odnosov med vrstniki za zagotovitev varnega, vključujočega in podpornega izobraževalnega okolja.