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The role of physical sports activities in traditional bullying behaviors among Albanian adolescents in upper secondary school (ages 16–18)

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between adolescents' participation in school-based physical sports activities and traditional bullying behaviors in Albanian upper secondary schools. The school environment plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' emotional and social development, where bullying manifested through physical, verbal, or psychological aggression remains a persistent issue. Adolescents reporting low emotional regulation or limited family and peer support are more likely to engage in aggressive or intimidating behaviors, while a weak school climate further increases the likelihood of bullying. Using a cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from 214 students aged 16–18 across 12 schools in Tirana. Findings show exceptionally high interest (91.5%) and willingness (98%) to participate in sports activities, accompanied by strong cooperative behaviors and peer support during physical activities. Experiences of isolation, mockery, or intimidation during sports were reported at low levels. The results indicate that active engagement in school sports strengthens group cohesion and prosocial interactions, contributing to a measurable reduction in traditional bullying behaviors among adolescents.

Keywords: Bullying, physical activity, school social climate, sports activities, adolescents.

1. Introduction

The social and physical environment of the school represents the space where adolescents develop their social, emotional and academic skills. These skills are manifested through a range of behaviors expressed during the time they spend at school. Albanian upper secondary schools exhibit a noticeable presence of bullying behaviors among adolescents, including violent, intimidating or exclusionary actions toward their peers. These bullying behaviors reflect not only internal conflicts among adolescents within the school setting but often reveal deeper psychosocial issues linked to family structure, community influences or personal experiences.

Adolescents who struggle with emotional regulation, who experience low levels of constructive family communication, inadequate emotional support, high family conflict, a lack of peer respect or limited psychological security within the home environment often seek alternative mechanisms to compensate for these deficits. Such compensation frequently takes the form of aggressive, intimidating or dominating behaviors toward others at school as a misguided attempt to gain control, attention or social recognition.

Furthermore, the quality of the school's social environment, including teacher-student relationships, collective norms, conflict resolution styles, peer-group functioning and overall emotional climate, plays a crucial role in influencing the level of bullying behaviors. When mutual respect, cooperation, teacher responsiveness and immediate intervention in unacceptable behaviors are lacking, the likelihood increases that bullying behaviors will become normalized and repetitive.

The negative impact of these factors directly contributes to the rise of traditional bullying behaviors in Albanian upper secondary schools, as well as creating an unsafe environment that hinders adolescents' emotional and academic development. According to Albanian studies by Dragoti and Ismaili (2017), the prevalence of traditional bullying involvement, whether as perpetrators or victims, is approximately 19.4%.

Reducing bullying in Albanian secondary schools, like in global pre-university education systems, requires the implementation of preventive strategies. One such strategy concerns the relationship between physical activity participation and traditional bullying behaviors in the school environment. The aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between bullying behaviors in school and adolescents' engagement in school-based sports activities. Increasing adolescents' involvement in physical sports activities strengthens cooperative behaviors and reduces the prevalence of bullying among peers.

This relationship is analyzed through adolescents' self-reported readiness to participate in physical activities, bullying experiences during sports activities and variables including perception, physical activity, physical aggression, verbal aggression, victimization levels and bullying perpetration.

2. Literature review

Olweus (1993), in his analysis of traditional bullying in school environments, distinguishes several forms related to verbal aggression, physical aggression and psychological abuse. Bullying is a repeated and intentional behavior carried out in the school environment by one adolescent or a group of adolescents toward a peer or a group of peers. Bullying typically occurs in the presence of a power imbalance among adolescents. It may be expressed through direct physical aggression or verbal aggression.

Physical aggression includes behaviors such as hitting, pushing or restraining the victim. Verbal aggression involves insults, threats or psychological and emotional

intimidation. Harris and Petrie (2006) categorize bullying victims into two types: passive victims and provocative victims. Passive victims are adolescents who generally go unnoticed, avoid confrontation and experience fear and sensitivity. They are physically weaker compared to the perpetrator.

Provocative victims, on the other hand, may sometimes exhibit inappropriate behaviors triggered by bullying, which unintentionally reinforce the bully's justification for their aggressive actions.

According to Voors (2000), the school environment, where adolescents spend a considerable portion of their time, should be acceptable and emotionally safe as it greatly influences their behaviors. An unpleasant school environment can become a space where adolescents are exposed to various forms of physical, emotional and psychological bullying.

Victims of bullying often face difficulties integrating socially with classmates. Del Rio et al. (2012) highlight that the effects of bullying may lead to long-term negative outcomes such as poor academic performance or increased substance abuse.

Creating a socially supportive school environment enriched with sports activities can attract adolescents and increase motivation to participate. Through active interaction, physical movement, and cooperative engagement, sports activities can improve the social climate of the school and increasing group cohesion among adolescents.

Garaigordobil and Fagoaga (2006), as well as Martinek et al. (2006), assert that well-structured physical activity programs in schools can effectively promote personal and social responsibility, sportsmanship and reduce violence among adolescents. These programs encourage interaction across age groups and cultivate humanistic values, social development and emotional growth.

Costa et al. (2008) emphasize that physical activity in school environments enables adolescents to learn cooperation, healthy competition, respect for others and the development of moral and ethical behavior.

Participation in physical sports activities provides benefits for both victims and perpetrators of bullying. Victims benefit through increased group respect, stress relief, emotional release, enhanced peer bonding, higher self-esteem and improved acceptance of diverse opinions. Perpetrators, on the other hand, may redirect anger and frustration into constructive behaviors, learn cooperation, develop self-respect and respect for others and improve their self-evaluation.

Promoting sports activities within schools contributes to creating a positive social environment characterized by high group cohesion and collaborative behaviors. Conversely, physical activities conducted in negative environments may increase competitiveness, dominance and aggression among adolescents.

3. Methodology

a. Study Characteristics

This study is a cross-sectional correlational survey involving variables such as physical sports activity, adolescent readiness, physical aggression, verbal aggression

and cooperative behavior. The analysis of graphical data illustrates the relationship between these variables to explain how physical activity relates to reducing traditional bullying behaviors in Albanian schools.

b. Instrument and Procedure

The instrument measures adolescents' perceptions of participation in school sports activities, group cohesion, and bullying behaviors experienced or observed among peers. It consists of three sections:

1. Readiness to participate and cooperative tendencies during physical activities;
2. Actual cooperative behaviors displayed during participation;
3. Discriminatory or bullying behaviors experienced during sports activities;

The instrument includes 11 Likert-scale statements (1 = never; 4 = always).

c. Population

The population includes adolescents in Albanian upper secondary education (ages 16–18). The sample consists of 214 students selected through stratified random sampling across 12 urban, suburban and rural schools in Tirana.

d. Data Collection

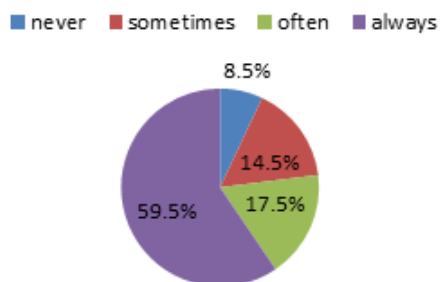
The instrument was completed individually and anonymously in the presence of the interviewer. The response rate was approximately 95%.

e. Data Analysis

Data were processed using SPSS 19. Likert-scale responses were converted into tables and graphs for analysis.

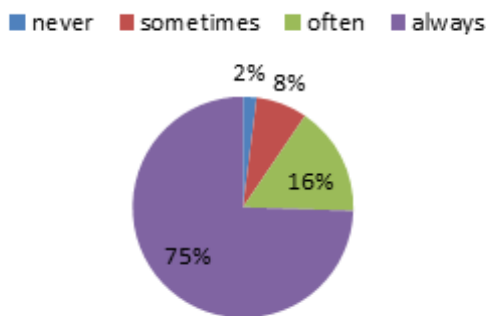
4. Results of the study

Adolescents report high interest levels (91.5%) and a high readiness to participate in physical sports activities (98%). They also indicate strong tendencies to demonstrate positive behaviors, help peers and prefer group sports activities (83%).



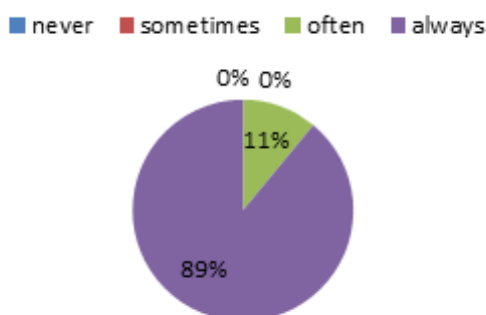
Graphic 1: I express interest in participating in sports activities.

Adolescents demonstrate a consistently high level of interest in participating in school-based sports activities, with this interest reaching approximately 91.5%. Such elevated interest is closely associated with their willingness to engage in the physical sports activities organized within the school environment. The corresponding data reflecting the degree of their willingness to participate are presented in Graphic No. 2.



Graphic 2: I am always willing to participate in the physical sports activities that are organized at school

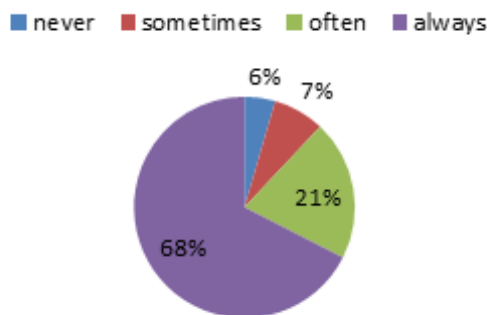
The markedly high level of adolescents' willingness to participate in physical sports activities at school, which surpasses 98%, aligns closely with their equally elevated interest in such activities. This consistency indicates that adolescents' motivation to engage in school-based physical activity is both stable and strongly positive. Furthermore, the level of adolescents' perceived propensity to exhibit positive behaviors during sports activities within the school environment is illustrated in Graphic 3.



Graph 3: I will demonstrate positive behavior toward my peers if I participate in physical sports activities at school.

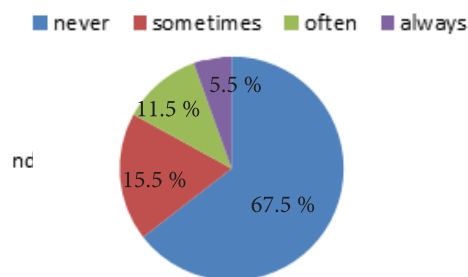
Adolescents' perceived tendency to exhibit positive behaviors toward their peers during sports activities in school follows the same pattern as their reported willingness

to assist their peers when participating in school-based sports activities. The level of perceived helpfulness toward peers in school sports activities is presented in Graphic No. 4.



Graphic 4: I will help my peers during sports activities at school.

The findings show that adolescents report a notably high level of willingness to exhibit helpful behaviors toward their peers during sports activities, with this proportion reaching approximately 94%. Adolescents' attitudes toward engagement in school-based sports activities appear to be structured around two distinct orientations. The first reflects a preference for individual sports activities, whereas the second reflects a preference for group-based sports activities. The extent to which adolescents favor participation in individual sports activities within the school setting is presented in Graphic No. 5.

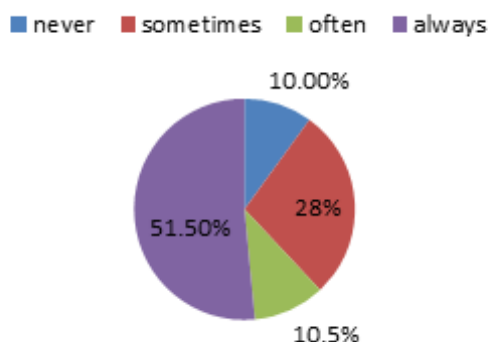


Graphic 5: I prefer individual sports activities at school rather than group sports activities.

A detailed reading of the graphic reveals that adolescents exhibit a markedly high level of preference for participating in group-based sports activities. Approximately 83% of the adolescents report that they prefer to engage in sports activities conducted in groups. This pronounced preference for group sports significantly shapes their behavioral tendencies during such activities, orienting them along two distinct behavioral pathways. The first pathway is characterized by the demonstration of positive cooperative behaviors toward peers in the context of group sports activities.

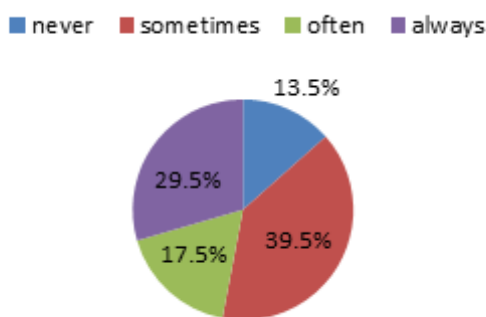
The second relates to the potential experience of victimization by peers during these activities.

The actual levels of positive behaviors displayed by adolescents toward their peers during school sports activities are illustrated in Graphics nos. 6 to 8. Specifically, the findings regarding the frequency of positive comments made about peers' abilities to perform tasks during school sports activities are presented in Graphic No. 6.



Graphic 6: I make positive comments about my peers during physical sports activities in the school environment.

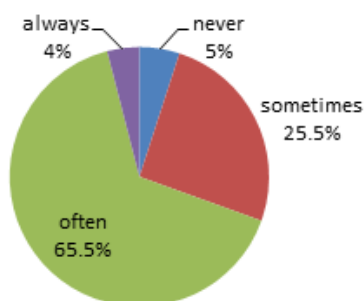
The level at which adolescents exhibit positive behaviors in the form of providing positive comments is relatively high, reaching approximately 90%. Meanwhile, the level of cooperative behaviors that adolescents display with their peer group during sports activities at school is presented in Graphic No. 7.



Graphic 7: I display cooperative behavior with my peers during physical sports activities in the school environment.

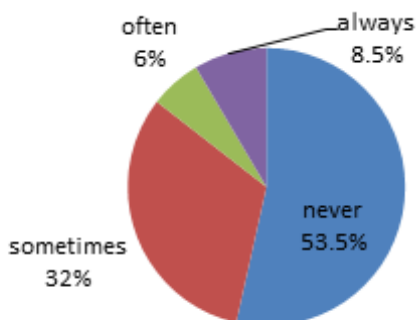
The level of cooperative behavior that adolescents display with their peers during sports activities at school is likewise high. Approximately one in two adolescents reports that they always or often demonstrate cooperative behaviors with their peer

group during school-based physical sports activities. Similarly, the level of positive behaviors expressed by adolescents in protecting their peers from aggressive or mocking behaviors by others is also notably high. This is evidenced by the fact that 95% of adolescents report engaging in protective behaviors toward their peers during sports activities, as illustrated in Graphic No. 8.



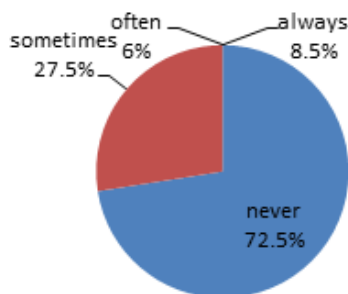
Graphic 8: I protect my peers from aggressive or mocking behaviors during sports activities at school.

In contrast, the extent to which adolescents may experience various forms of discriminatory or bullying behaviors from their peers during school sports activities is illustrated in Graphics nos. 9 to 11. The level of adolescents' perceived experience of being isolated or excluded by their peer group during sports activities is presented in Graphic No. 9.



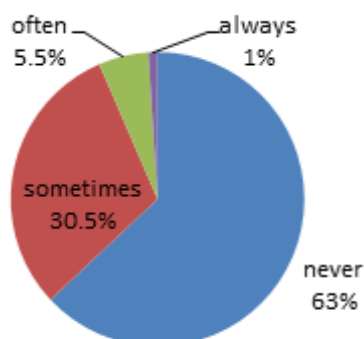
Graphic 9: I feel isolated from my peer group during sports activities at school.

Meanwhile, the level of adolescents' perceived experience of being subjected to mocking, insulting or intimidating behaviors by their peers during sports activities at school is presented in Graphic No. 10.



Graphic 10: I feel that during sports activities there are insulting or mocking behaviors directed at me by my peers at school.

Meanwhile, the level of adolescents' perception that, during sports activities at school, their peers are subjected to mocking, insulting or intimidating behaviors by others is presented in Graphic No. 11.



Graphic 11: I perceive that my peers are subjected to insulting or mocking behaviors by others during school-based sports activities.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the relationship between adolescents' participation in physical sports activities and the prevalence of traditional bullying in the school environment focuses on two key dimensions: first, adolescents' perceived willingness to engage in school-based physical sports activities, and second, the extent to which they report displaying positive, protective behaviors toward their peers or, alternatively, experiencing victimization during these physical sports activities.

Adolescents' perceived willingness to participate in physical sports activities is notably high. Indicators such as interest in school sports activities (91.5%), willingness to take part in physical sports activities (98%), the perceived likelihood of demonstrating positive behaviors toward peers if participating in school sports

(89%), and the perceived likelihood of helping peers during such activities (89%) collectively demonstrate a strong readiness among adolescents to engage in school-based sports activities.

Comparative analysis of the data suggests that adolescents who engage in sports activities at school exhibit a positive association between their high level of willingness to participate and their strong tendency to display positive social behaviors with peers. Furthermore, the comparison between adolescents' perceived likelihood of demonstrating positive behaviors during sports activities and the actual levels of positive behaviors displayed during direct participation reveals close alignment, with no significant differences between perception and reality.

Adolescent behavior during sports activities appears to follow two main directions. The first involves engaging in positive and cooperative behaviors with peers, while the second concerns the experience of victimization by peers during sports activities. The level of positive behaviors displayed with peers during sports activities is illustrated in Graphics nos. 6 to 8. For example, one in two adolescents consistently provides positive comments regarding the athletic abilities of their peers during school sports activities. Additionally, more than 86% of adolescents confirm that they demonstrate cooperative behaviors during such activities. Positive behaviors expressed through protecting peers from aggressive, mocking or insulting actions by others are also reported at very high levels: 95%, as illustrated in Graphic No. 8.

These consistently high levels of cooperative behaviors observed during active participation in school sports correspond closely with adolescents' perceptions of how they would behave if engaged in such activities. The comparison of these datasets confirms a clear relationship between school-based physical activity and bullying behaviors. Higher levels of cooperative behavior are associated with a reduction in adolescents' inclination to display bullying behaviors.

The extent to which adolescents experience victimization during school sports activities, as illustrated in Graphics nos. 9 to 11, further strengthens this conclusion. Comparative analysis of Graph 9 shows that more than 80% of adolescents do not experience isolation from their peers during sports activities. This reflects a declining tendency of discriminatory or bullying behaviors within the context of school sports. High levels of group cohesion during school sports are also confirmed by adolescents' reports regarding exposure to mocking, insulting or intimidating behaviors. Three out of four adolescents (Graphic No. 10) report never having experienced such behaviors from their peers during sports activities, while only one in four reports rare exposure to such behaviors.

A similar decreasing trend in bullying is observed in the extent to which adolescents witness mocking or insulting behaviors directed at their peers. Only 6.5% report witnessing such behaviors often or always during school sports activities.

Several factors may contribute to bullying behaviors during school-based sports activities, including differences in adolescents' physical abilities, individual superiority in sports performance and varying levels of competitiveness. However, analysis comparing cooperative and discriminatory behaviors reveals that, despite

these potential influences, adolescents' participation in physical sports activities contributes significantly to strengthening group cohesion.

The high level of cooperative behavior demonstrated during sports activities, combined with the low levels of victimization reported, indicates a meaningful relationship between adolescents' physical activity and bullying behaviors. This suggests that increased adolescent participation in school-based sports activities enhances cooperative peer interactions while reducing the prevalence of bullying within the school environment.

6. Conclusion

The principal findings of this study reveals that:

- The high level of adolescents' willingness to participate in physical sports activities contributes to increased cooperative behavior among peers in the school environment.
- Adolescents' participation in school sports activities, regardless of differences in physical ability, individual superiority or competitiveness, enhances positive group communication and pro-social behaviors.
- Promoting school policies aimed at increasing adolescents' participation in sports activities plays an essential role in reducing bullying behaviors within the school environment.
- There is a clear positive relationship between adolescents' engagement in school-based sports activities and cooperative behavior. This positive relationship indicates that expanding school sports programs is an effective strategy for fostering pro-social behaviors and reducing discriminatory and bullying behaviors among adolescents in Albanian upper secondary schools.

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