Bullying (*ijime*) among Japan's youth

Initiating Author: Laura Wirtz

Introduction

Bullying (known as ijime in the Japanese culture) and school refusal (tokokyohi) are two issues taking place in school aged students in Japan. Ijime, according to Morita and Ohsako (1997), is defined as "a type of aggressive behavior by which someone who holds a dominant position in a group-interaction process, by intentional or collective arts, causes mental and/or physical suffering to others inside a group" (as cited in Rios-Ellis, Bellamy, & Shoji, 2000, p.228). Under the umbrella of ijime there are multiple characteristics include acts of violence from groups against one victim that are dark and cruel in nature, these acts of violence are generally physical and/or verbal isolation (Omori, 1999; Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000).

The group context of bullying is a phenomenon found in Japan consisting of four roles that students fall into during ijime conflicts according to Morita and Ohsako (1997), "bullies, bullied students, an audience, and bystanders;" "audience refers to students who are amused by the bullying incidents and "bystanders" are those students who act as if they do not know the victims" (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). Ijime often occurs among students of the same age and in the same homeroom class (Naito & Gielen, n.d.) However, it should be noted that ijime takes on different forms when the conflict occurs between boys and girls. According to Morita and Nagan (1997), girls will participate in group ijime tactics like hiding possessions of the victim and socially isolating the victim, while boys will employ tactics like "physical violence, social isolation and bribery or blackmail" (Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000, p.235).

Many times, the occurrence of ijime can trigger futouko, a "common syndrome occurring when students experiencing Ijime suffer psychological and physiological disorders as a result, which makes attending school under those circumstances very difficult" which can lead to tokokyohi, school refusal by ijime victims (Akiba, 2005). In addition to tokokyohi, suicide among school aged children has skyrocketed and become a true effect of ijime, first coming to light in the 1980's and then cycling to peaks every decade since.

Information Sources

A variety of authors have researched and analyzed ijime; causes and effects on the Japanese culture with a focus on school aged children and the high rate this occurs in schools. Sources include: *School Psychology International; Nippon.com; Childresearch.net; Japanfocus.org; International Journal of*

Educational Research; Additional academic research papers were utilized in this chapter.

Historical / Cultural / Theoretical Background

According to Shinkichi, the years following World War II were particularly lean for Japan, crime and violence were common and bullying during this time reflected a "survival of the fittest" approach (2012). As the economic effects impact families to become haves and have-nots, children raised within families that have been able to provide and flourish may have the tendency to "engage in a systematic persecution of the weak" children of families that are in the have-nots category (Shinkichi, 2012). According to Woods Prewitt (1988), during this period an emphasis in the educational system was put on the collective efforts of groups to move towards a betterment of the Japanese society overall, individualism had to be set aside (as cited in Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000, p.228).

The most common reason given by students initiating ijime on specific victims is because "they had characteristics different from what was considered normal among the students," these differences include deviations in personalities from the bully's or small behavior traits that include being perceived as selfish, noisy, or shy; even having a slightly different hairstyle or having a different appearance because one parent is not Japanese can deem a student a target for ijime (Akiba, 2005, p.228; Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000). What are encouraged forms of individuality in many Western cultures is not the case in the Japanese culture. There are many rules and regulations, extremely detailed in nature for students to follow regarding "school uniforms, hairstyles, grooming, acceptable places in town for the students to visit, and even the precise route that students must take on their way home" (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). Students are not encouraged to examine their individual preferences and traits; rather they are in school to learn how to function in group situations in a society that is extremely demanding. Often time's Japanese students will describe themselves as ordinary rather than individual with personal quirks and traits (Naito & Gielen, n.d.)

This group effort approach is a large part of how issues and situations are handled in the Japanese school systems. Highly controlled and centralized from the top, the educational system in Japan is controlled by a national curricula and textbook recommendations from the Monbukagakushyo (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology). The society as a whole understands that the failure of students in this educational system will "destroy a student's chances to lead an economically successful life" (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). With the emphasis on group efforts and sharing activities of cleaning the classrooms and the school hallways many activities take place in the homeroom. Group collaboration to solve problems involving a student in the classroom occurs regularly. When a student is involved in activities like vandalism or violence (home or at school) the homeroom teacher is notified and then the topic is brought to the homeroom class setting for all to discuss with a focus on the class solving the problem. It is presumed that the behavior "emerges as a result of detachment from the homeroom" a cultural assumption (Akiba, 2004, p.219). The homeroom group setting is also the location of another growing group activity, ijime (Naito &Gielen, n.d.).
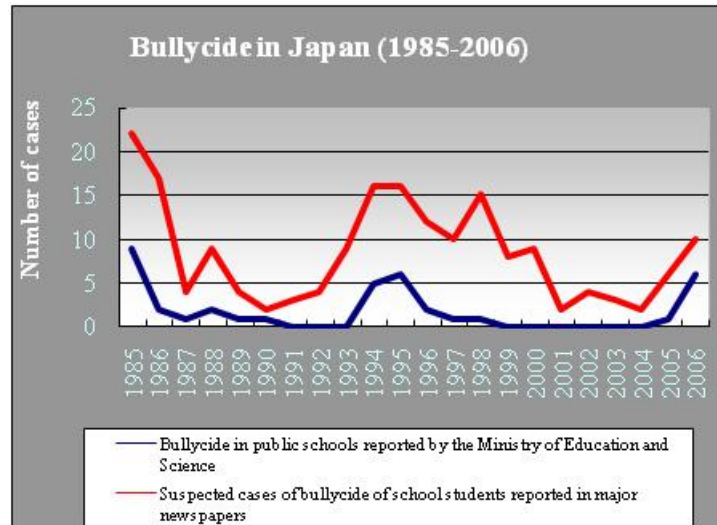
The focus on group effort and collaboration has led the Japanese society away from a focus on

families and relationships. Due to the high stress and expectations of the father in households to provide for the family and to be a successful member of society for the betterment of the Japanese society, many families have a weak, "psychologically absent" father figure who is stressed with being successful at work can look to be lazy during their short periods of time at work, forcing mothers to engage in "exclusive mother-child bonds" where they focus solely on the happiness of their children, indulging them in all wants in the pursuit of happiness; which in turn, can lead their children to have a lack of empathy for those that don't have all they want or are different from them (Naito & Gielen, n.d., Omori, 1999.). As time goes on, there is a diminished focus on extended family structures with the mother spending decreasing amounts of time at home as they pursue careers but this is not supplemented by an increase of time spent at home by the fathers. There are fewer children being born with more children growing up as only children and experiencing less exposure to other children that leads to "weakening in their human relations skills" (Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000). The stress of success in all members of a family can lead to diminishment of communication and interaction, leaving each family member to carry on "a lifestyle dependent of the other members where there is little communication or sharing of a common activity among family members" leading toward alienation of all members of the family; subsequently discouraging children to approach their parents with concerns and problems (Omori, 1999).

When ijime is experienced by students and they have the courage to bring this concern to their teachers, many receive feedback to endure and not pursue resolving or preventing conflict. Some teachers in the Japanese school system "remain ignorant of Ijime incidents or are inclined to hush them up in order to protect themselves and their school's reputation in the eyes of the public and their administrative superiors" (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). Overtime students do not approach their teachers with the issues because telling them could lead to further bullying or becoming a new target for bullies if a student in the audience or bystander role are found out for informing an authoritative figure on the problems (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). Because cases of ijime are rarely reported many administrators and officials state these cases are best handled internally in the classrooms without the use of counselors, often time's families and students are told it would be best for them to transfer to another school, placing blame and responsibility on the victim rather than the bully or group. With the approach of "handling conflicts internally," this allows administrators and educators to be rewarded for their ability to have a lack of ijime related issues because nothing is reported outside of the institution (Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000). In some cases, students are bullied first by their homeroom teacher before becoming victims of ijime from the rest of the class. In 2008, a 13 year old student committed suicide after a long period of ijime that was started by his teacher who ranked students through a strawberry classification process. This student was labeled as "a strawberry 'unfit to dispatch'" (Yoneyama, 2008).

Current Issues & Developments

Since 1985, the Japanese government has kept track of ijime related cases; from 1985-2006 an estimated 200 ijime-related suicides occurred. However, the number reported by the Ministry of Education and Science is quite drastically different from suspected cases reported in major newspapers. As reported, "the students died in 'ordinary' circumstances, being bullied by 'ordinary' ('good') students", this leads the reader to believe that ijime is just a regular part of life in schools in Japan and suicide related to these cases is just as normal (Yoneyama, 2008).

Bullycide in Japan (1985-2006)

Y-axis: Number of cases (25, 20, 15, 10, 5, 0)
X-axis: 1985–2006

Legend:
— Bullycide in public schools reported by the Ministry of Education and Science
— Suspected cases of bullycide of school students reported in major newspapers

(Yoneyama, 2008)

In 1986, incidents of students committing suicide were presented on national television shows and in newspapers; nine in total for the year and many were accounted for with suicide notes describing their experiences with ijime in school. Their calls for help had gone unnoticed. Once instance that was widely publicized was a 13-year-old student who hung himself after writing a suicide note that called out several peers who had "created a living hell for him" (Naito and Gielen, n.d.). In one specific event, he came to school and found the group leaders had set up a mock funeral for him, placing his desk in front of the class with his photo, flowers and a sympathy card that had been signed by most of the class, other peers and four teachers, including his homeroom teacher. This mock funeral made him believe that many felt he was a failure. His father had contacted the teacher in prior instances for assistance regarding the ijime cases and received a reply that he should transfer schools (Naito and Gielen, n.d.).

In the 90's the Japanese Ministry of Education initiated efforts to determine characteristics and prevalence of ijime in schools and attempted to limit the occurrence of ijime. This came after ten ijime-related suicides occurred from November 1994 to November 1995. Part of the efforts included conducting a survey to determine how prevalent bullying was in schools during that time period. This survey found that "57,000 cases of ijime were reported in the Japanese schools surveyed and 12.4 percent of students states that they had been the victims of bullying", 17.4 percent of students reported participating in ijime-related activity (Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000, p.230). Further data collected found that ijime cases increases from first grade through the first year of junior high school, during this time students are particularly prone to this behavior. Ijime begins to decline from the second year of junior high school through the final year of high school by 50 percent each year (Rios-Ellis, et al., 2000).

October 2006 brought another trigger point in the acknowledgement of school knowledge of ijime related cases in the Hokkaido school system, even though several suicide notes had been found. The board of education and school denied bullying was the cause of the suicide of a 12-year-old girl. In mid-October of the same year another student, a 13-year-old boy took his own life mentioning bullying in his suicide note. The school finally admitted a student was a target of bullying after pressure from the parents of a 14-year-old girl who committed suicide citing bullying in her suicide note in late-October 2006. After six suicides of students over the course of six weeks in October and November 2006, and the suicide of the principal of the school who had so adamantly denied bullying was occurring in the school. Once the media was saturated with this information and images principals and board of education members bowed low in front of media "apologizing for their 'inadequate response to bullying'" (Yoneyama,

2008).

Tales of bullying were captured by Motoko Akiba who spent a year in a Japanese classroom of a friend who taught English to students. Akiba distributed diaries to the students and informed them of the research being conducted, specifically about ijime. All participation was voluntary with the majority of students turning in diaries daily and many reporting about ijime activities experienced. A 14-year-old girl reported she had been a victim of ijime since elementary school. Her possessions were often stolen, notebooks were damaged and filled with mean words like "'Die!', 'Ugly!', 'Feel sick to be with you!', and 'Always be alone!'" (Akiba, 2005, p.224). Another girl had her towel stolen to use as a dust cloth for the ground and would find pins inside her shoes as they were left outside the classroom with the other students' shoes. Finally, a 15-year-old boy was regularly drug, kicked, and punched by his peers during recess time in homeroom. His possessions were often stolen and damaged; he too would find his shoes missing or present with pins in them. Rumors were started that he was planning violent attacks on the bullies and on family members, which intensified ijime acts from his peers (Akiba, 2005).

Again in 2011, a suicide of a 13-year-old boy occurred in October, pushing bullying back into the media. However, this time, the government released the findings of a survey that indicated that cases of ijime reported had been on an ongoing rising trend (Shinkichi, 2012).

Analysis & Discussion

Globally, there are common forms of bullying like teasing and name-calling. This type of bullying is seen as "a relatively easy, low-risk, mild form of harassment" occurring in many cultures in the earliest stages of bullying (Shinkichi, 2012). However, physical bullying is more prevalent in cultures that people must compete for survival and where violence is common. In these cultures and societies bullying is seen as a necessary part of life for children to grow up with and learn to cope with. "Children are taught that it is better to bully than to be bullied, and the victims tend to receive blame rather than sympathy" (Shinkichi, 2012). Compared to the United States and European countries, Japan has extremely low rates of delinquency and crime by juveniles. However, ijime has been a serious social and educational problem that has been covered up and half-hearted attempts have been made at stopping these cases from occurring. (Akiba, 2005).

Unfortunately the attempts for solving ijime cases and problems have not taken into consideration some successful programs and action plans that have been implemented around the world. Because Japanese schools have chosen to deal with student problems including bullying with classroom collaboration teachers have not expressed the need or desire for prevention programs. Prevention programs in Europe and the US are common but are not available for use in Japanese schools because of this lack of demand (Akiba, 2005).

Even as ijime cases are reported to drop as students get older and advance through the education system there is a concern that ijime may appear in the workplace later on because the culture remains supportive and reliant upon group efforts and collaboration. Individualization and acceptance are not learned traits of students as they progress through their education track. It has been reported by The Japan Industrial Counselor Association that "80% of industrial counselors had observed workplace

bullying or had been asked advice relating to it" (Abe & Henly, 2010, p.111); according to the Japanese Nursing Association (2004), "the prevalence of bullying is about 8%-10% among Japanese nurses" (Abe & Henly, 2010, p.111). When bullying occurs in the professional environment in professions where teamwork and collaboration is imperative for the success of the stated outcome, like nursing, the actual results can be significantly devastating if the goal is to cause the victim to fail which may hinder the progress of a patient.

Recommendations & Conclusions

Even with this underlying dark side to the Japanese school system the schools overall run more efficiently, are more organized and have less violence compared to those in the United States and Europe (Naito & Gielen, n.d.). The difference is that the United States and European societies acknowledge the issues in their schools and have worked to implement programs to prevent and put an end to bullying and violence in the classroom.

The Japanese school system needs to implement school counselors as a base point for students to go to talk about issues and concerns to find answers and solutions to problems rather than presenting personal problems to a group of students who lack maturity and resources to accurately and professionally offer advice and empathy. Teachers and administration need to focus on how to punish students who seek victims for bullying efforts rather than telling the victim to endure and deal with it, there are psychological reasons for why students bully others, there should be a way to mediate issues and provide support for all members of ijime cases. Teachers and administration should be held accountable as well for positively identifying and handling ijime cases, and if they choose to not address issues or direct them to the proper authorities should be punished as well.

As the elders of the Japanese culture pass away and the population deteriorates, there will need to be an introduction of non-Japanese residents to the country. As this occurs there will be an increase in bullying in the youth because of obvious visual differences and personality traits among the youth unless the Japanese culture can begin to embrace and encourage individuality and teach their youth (and embrace it as adults) that being different is OK and that everyone can be their own person yet work together towards a common goal while reinforcing that bullying is unacceptable and will face consequences if used. Communication opportunities must be created and embraced among mixed-age groups to build relationships that are supportive with adults.

A great deal of change must come from the government though, through their prescribed curricula and planning of the academic process a plan of action to handle ijime cases and preventative measures including teacher training and the funding of school counselors are necessary items to start a fight against the acceptance of bullying. There must also be the ability to punish students who initiate or participate in bullying. While school is mandatory there must be ways to instill a sense of integrity in students that by making the wrong choices on how relationships are handled there is a good chance that they may tarnish or hurt their possibilities for success in the future outside of school even if they succeed academically. Programs embracing individualism and opinions should be introduced in schools to encourage acceptance of others, while highlighting that differences and individuality can help groups and collaboration be highly successful.

Bibliography / Reference List

Abe, K., & Henly, S. J. (2010). Bullying (ijime) among Japanese hospital nurses. *Nursing Research, 59*(2), 110-118.

Akiba, M. (2004). Nature and correlates of ijime – bullying in Japanese middle school. *International Journal of Educational Research, 41*(3), 216-236.

Naito, T. & Gielen, U. P. (n.d.). Bullying and ijime in Japanese schools: a sociocultural perspective. Retrieved from http://www.uwegielen.com/Bullying%20and%20Ijime%20in%20Japanese %20Schools%20A%20Sociocultural%20Perspective.pdf

Omori, M. (1999, January 1). Ijime (bullying). Retrieved from: http://www.childresearch.net/ papers/school/1999_03.html

Rios-Ellis, B., Bellamy, L., & Shoji, J. (2000). An examination of specific types of ijime within Japanese schools. *School of Psychology International, 21*(3), 227-241.

Shinkichi, Sugimori. (2012, October 4). Anatomy of Japanese bullying. *Nippon.com*. Retrieved from http://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00054/.

Yoneyama, S. (2008, December 31). The era of bullying: Japan under neoliberalism. *Japan Focus*. Retrieved from http://www.japanfocus.org/-Shoko-YONEYAMA/3001