

Exploring Thoughts of Victims of School Bullying Through Drawings

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Abstract

This study explored the underlying thoughts of victims of school bullying through analysis of their drawings. Eighty senior secondary students (studying in classes 9 to 11) identified as victims based on the Illinois Victimization Scale participated in the study. Participants drew their victimization experiences and provided elaborations of their drawings. Analysis of participants' responses involved the framework method. Results showed that thoughts of bullied participants were related to the (1) outcomes of being victimized (2) dealing with the bullies, and (3) the reason for bullying. The participants evinced various thoughts related to direct or indirect coping, victim-related reasons, and bully related reasons as gauged by their drawings. The findings of this study were interpreted in the light of developmental-ecological framework and research. The article indicates implications for future research and professionals to help the victims of school bullying.

Keywords *Drawing · Coping · School bullying · Qualitative method*

School authorities and practitioners working in the area of child and adolescent mental health across the world are realizing the importance of tackling the issue of school bullying. This has motivated vast research on school bullying. Extant research on bullying and cognitions relates bullying and victimization to the theory of mind^[1], conduct disorder and theory of mind^[2], executive functions^[3], social-cognitive factors^[4], and Cognitive Behavior Therapy intervention^[5]. The above-referred studies focused on cognition and its relation to bullying but did not investigate the actual content of thoughts, an aspect which is uniquely considered in the present study. In the context of school bullying, a victim is defined as “a student who is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students”^[6]. Due to repeated victimization in schools, bullied children report symptoms of depression, headaches, anxiety, stomachaches, and academic difficulties. In response to school bullying, school-based intervention programs have produced a dramatic decline in the rate of school bullying^[7] and have led to the upsurge of research in cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of bullying.

Neisser^[8] defined cognition as “the activity of knowing: the acquisition, organization, and use of knowledge.” Cognition involves a variety of functions such as thinking, learning, perception, attention,

memory, retention, decision making, reasoning, and problem-solving. This study aimed at examining children's thoughts about their bullying experiences. The study chose thoughts because of their ability to predict children's current and future behavioral and emotional reactions to negative situations.

Questionnaires provide limited information about bullying. Victims' drawings of school bullying allow researchers to understand actual lived experiences from their perspective, and to realize the underlying emotions and motivations in bullying^[9]. Bosacki et al.^[9] argued that a conventional method to assess bullying does not allow the participants to report their complete bullying experiences. The use of drawings in interventions like art therapy is very useful for adolescents with anxiety issues^[10]. Drawings enable the investigators to understand the bullying experience of the victimized child, the power dynamics between the bully and the bullied^[11], and the context of bullying. This study set the following objectives: (1) to identify the victims of school bullying and (2) to understand victims' experiences by analyzing their thoughts.

Method

Research Design

This research employed the qualitative participatory

visual method and semi-structured interviews. Past research has shown the relevance of participatory visual methods or art-based methods with children [12]. Semi-structured interviews investigated children's depictions. Steps involved in data analysis are described in the analysis section.

Participants

Participants were selected from among the students of 9th-11th grades studying in different schools located in Delhi, India. Only students who volunteered to participate with the approval of parents and school principals were involved in the study. The study used purposive sampling, and 300 participants were selected according to two criteria which include classes of 9, 10, and 11 and gender (male and female). Illinois victimization scale [13] was administered to identify the victims. The final sample comprised 80 participants (60 male and 20 female) in the age range of 16-18 years.

Measures

The study used the Illinois victimization scale to identify the victims. The material used for the drawing task comprised A-4 size paper, pencil, pen, eraser, and sharpener.

The Illinois Victimization Scale. It is a subscale of the Illinois Bully Scale [13] which includes 18 items on bullying phenomenon and fighting. The present study adopted and administered only the "victimization" subscale to identify victims of school bullying. The Victimization subscale comprises four items (that measure frequency of being picked on, made fun of, called names, and hit or pushed). It is a five-point Likert-type scale. Espelage and Holt [13] found a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .87 for their scale. Espelage et al. [14] found significant correlations with peer nominations of bullying, which showed acceptable concurrent validity of the scale.

The drawing task. The drawing task involved the depictions of participants' victimization experiences in school. The drawing task was followed by semi-structured interviews based on the elaboration of participants' drawings.

Procedure

The Victimization subscale of Illinois Bully Questionnaire [13] was administered to three hundred participants for identifying the victims of school

bullying. It was followed by the drawing task. After checking the familiarity with the word "victim" and "school bullying" the task was administered in 40 mins in groups on separate days in different schools. The instruction for the drawing task was, "Draw a scene of your victimization taking place in school and also show in drawing what you were thinking by a thought bubble". The researcher followed the drawing task with individual semi-structured interviews with the prior permission of participants. During the interview, the researcher asked each participant to describe and provide details of the drawing. Each interview lasted for about 15 min. Towards the end of the semi-structured interview with all the participants, the researcher debriefed the participants and thanked them.

Analysis of Drawings

The drawings were shown to two judges: the researcher and a freelance counselor well trained in art therapy and qualitative research. The judges initially independently surveyed the drawings and developed themes. The judges sorted out any discrepancies in the emerging themes through discussion and mutual agreement. The inter-judge reliability was satisfactory (95 percent agreement on emerging themes). Further analysis used only those themes on which the judges agreed with each other.

The researcher transcribed the interview data and used the "Framework method" to analyze the data. The Framework method is a five-stage qualitative analytic process espoused by Ritchie and Spencer [15] and comprises familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation. A brief explanation of these five stages according to Ritchie and Spencer is presented: *Familiarization* involves reading and re-reading the transcript, and listening back to the audio-recorded content of interviews, to gain the basic information about the collected data. *Identifying a thematic framework* or indexing involves the emergence, sorting, and sifting of the coded themes and categories obtained after the familiarization stage. *Indexing* refers to the process whereby the thematic framework or index is systematically applied to the data in its textual form. Themes corresponding to the selected parts of data are identified and annotated for further analysis. *Charting* is the next step which involves the presentation of the coded data in a matrix for each theme. The chart shows for each participant a clustered theme embedded within various codes, supporting annotated data, and reference

to each page and line. *Mapping and interpretation* involve analyzing the data as a whole comprising the various obtained themes, categories, and descriptions for all participants. The present study dealt with the contextual question, i.e., identifying the thoughts of bullied students and therefore framework method was considered as an appropriate method for addressing contextual questions^[15].

Results

For the present sample of the study, a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .82 was obtained for the Illinois Victimization scale. All the participants produced

complete drawings. The steps involved in the ‘Framework’ method and as used in the present study are described above in the analysis of the drawings section. Figs. 1-6 present drawings drawn by six participants to discuss the results. Table 1 shows the three themes that finally emerged from the analytical framework, along with the codes and their descriptions. Table 2 presents the thoughts related to the outcomes of victimization. Table 3 summarizes the thoughts related to dealing with the bullies, and Table 4 provides thoughts related to the reason for victimization. The italicized statements in the tables show the participant’s written responses used for analysis.

Table 1 Code and description from the final thematic framework for thoughts of school victims.

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Outcomes of victimization	
Thoughts about consequences	Defensive reactivity, low will
Cognitive response of victim	Thoughts about hiding the bullying experience, thoughts of revenge
Dealing with the bullies	
Coping thoughts	Active coping, passive coping
Metacognition	Reporting bullying, tackling bullies
Reasons for bullying	
Bully related	Fun, strong
Victim related	Appearance, poor social skills, loneliness

Table 2 Thoughts related to outcomes of victimization

Participant	Consequences	Cognitive response of victim
Participant 5	“If a student is being bullied in the school he/she would not feel good and there can be bad consequences”	“I should not tell to anybody; I should fight with him”
Participant 17		“Why everyone makes fun of me? I can’t tell anyone. They all make fun and laugh at me”

Table 3 Thoughts related to dealing with the bullies

Participant	Coping thoughts	Metacognition
Participant 36	“He troubles me a lot, I thought to tell my mother, I sometimes slap him”	
Participant 80		“Should I tell my parents or friends? Should I tell my parents?”
Participant 3		“No one helps me when I was pushed down, I will also not help anyone”

Table 4 Thoughts related to the reason for being victimized

Participant	Bully related	Victim related
Participant 43	“Bully’s preference for hitting me just to have fun”	
Participant 23		“Bullied because of my looks,”
Participant 2		“Bullied due to my poor social skills,”
Participant 7		“Verbally bullied by others for being a twit and for my loneliness”

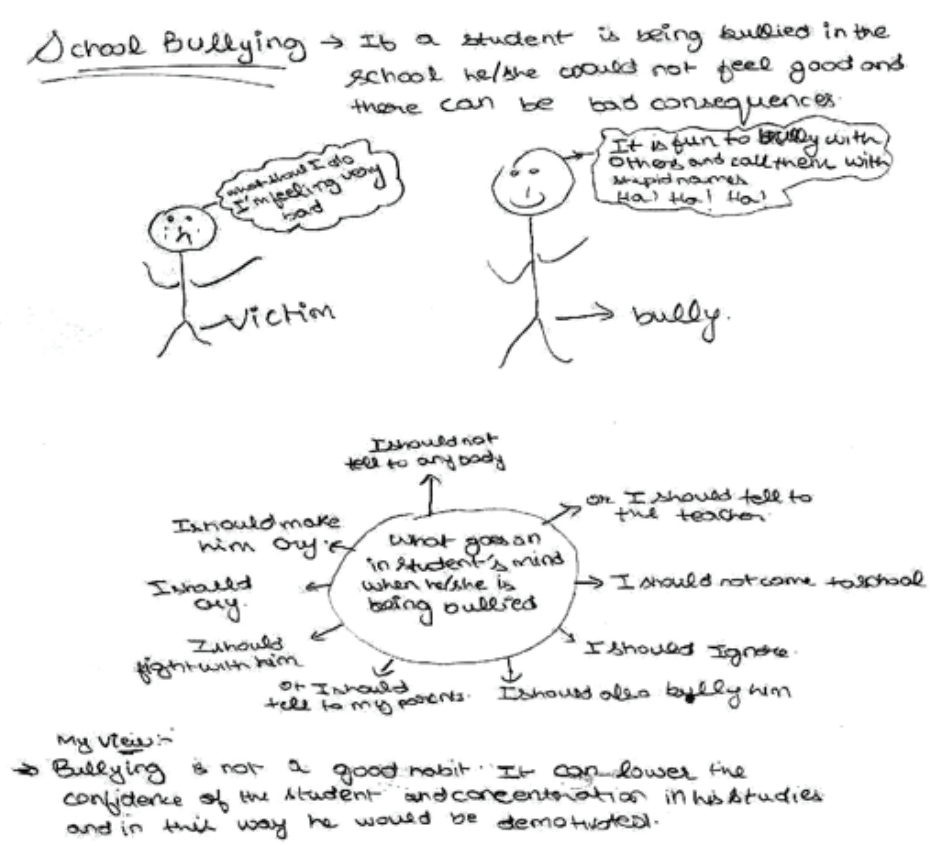


Fig.1 Participant 5’s drawing depicting thoughts related to outcomes of victimization

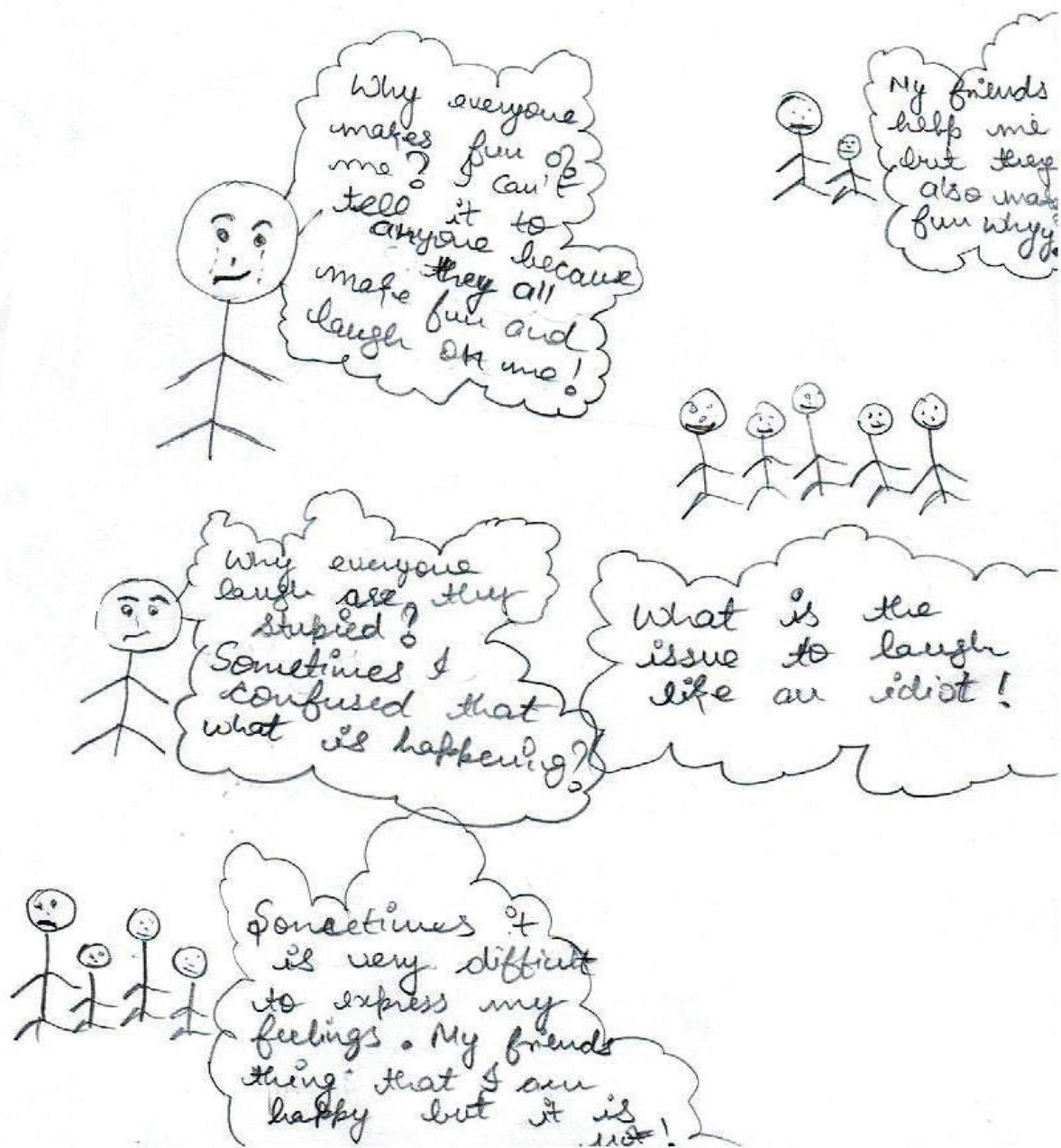
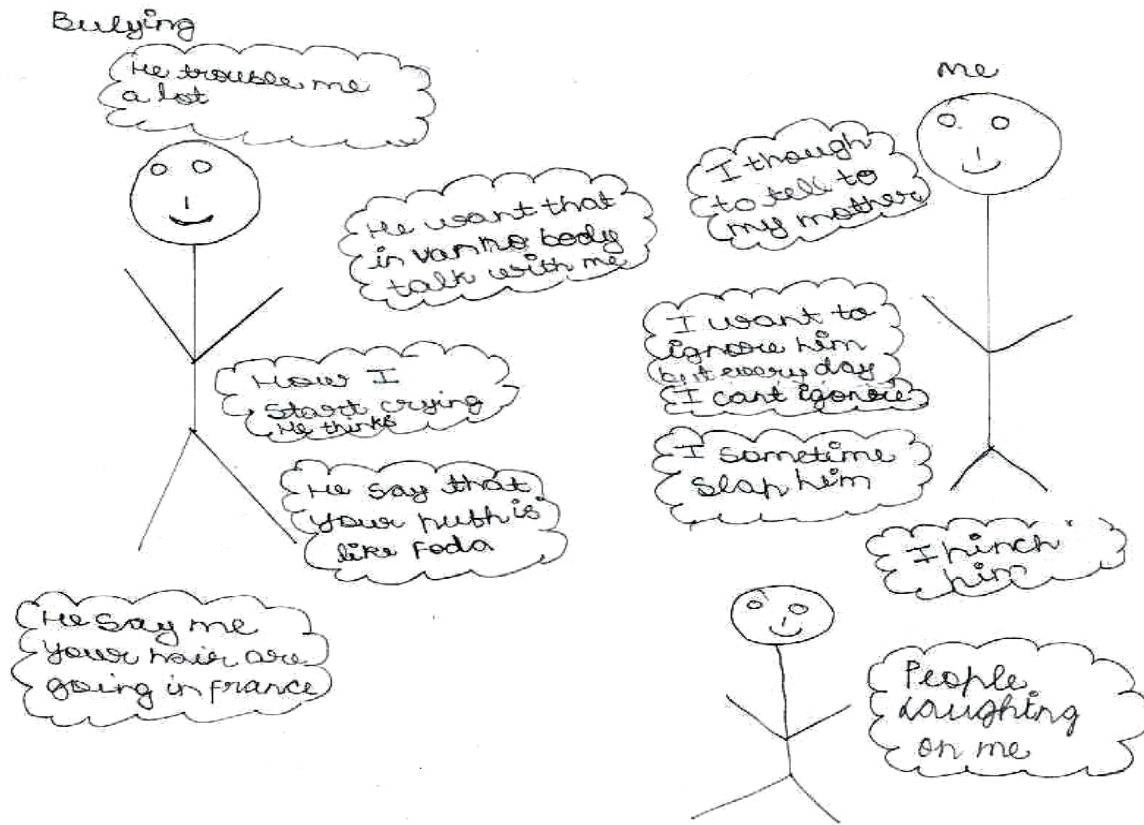


Fig. 2 Participant 17's portrayal of thoughts related to outcomes of victimization



3 Participant 36's drawing conveying thoughts related to dealing with the bullies

Fig.

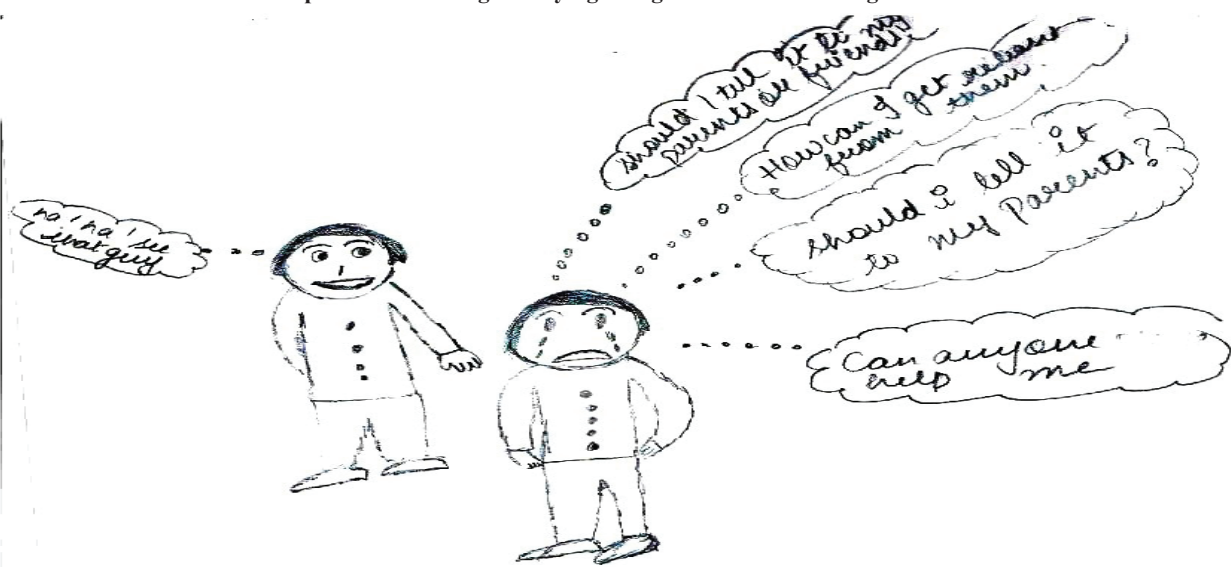


Fig. 4 Participant 80's drawing of thoughts related to dealing with the bullies



Fig. 5 Participant 7's depiction of thoughts related to the reason for being bullied

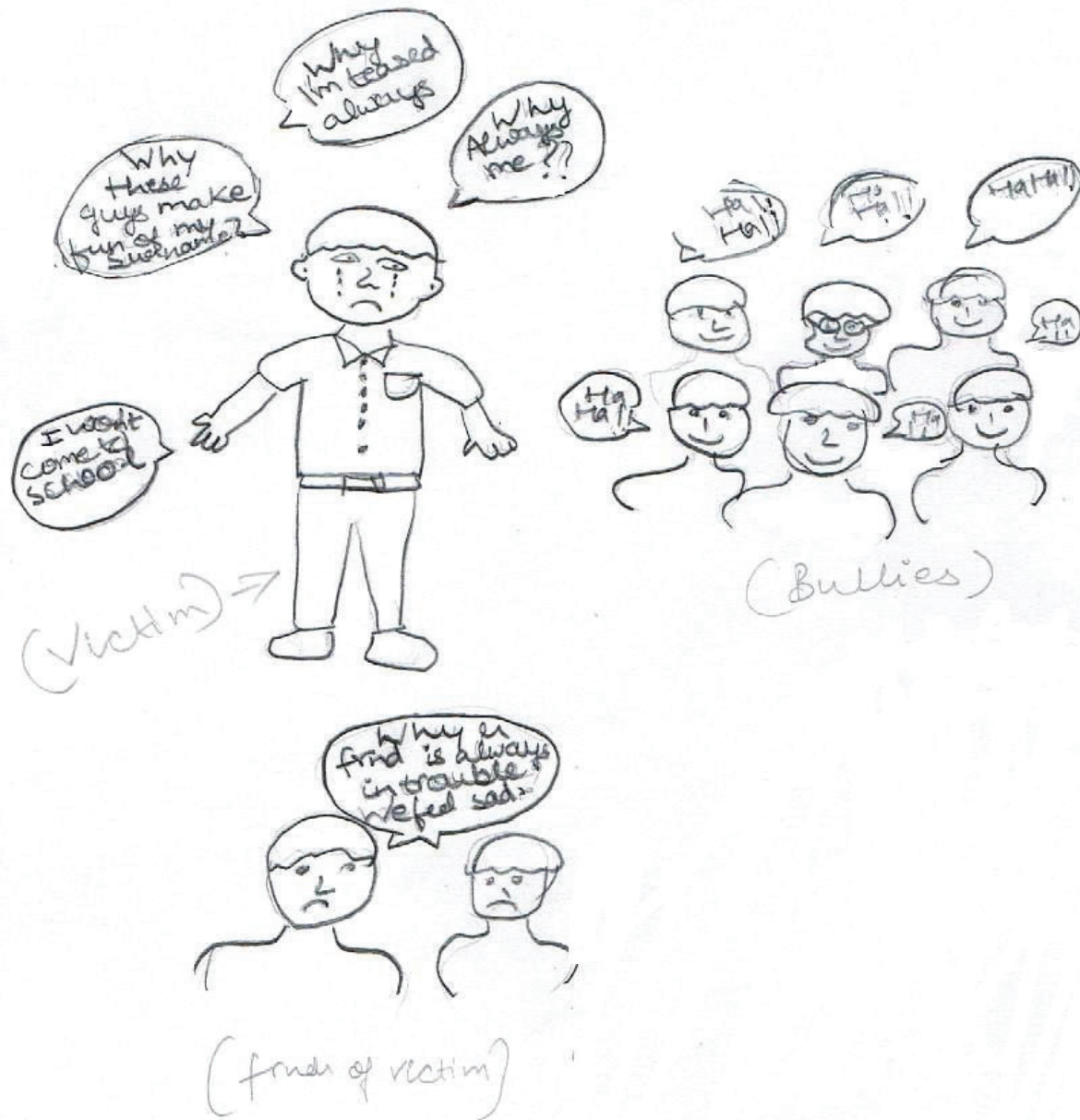


Fig. 6 Participant 76's depiction showing thoughts related to the reason for being bullied

Discussion

The present study could achieve the objectives to identify the bullied in selected schools and to understand victims' thoughts related to bullying. The overall thoughts of the victims regarding the consequences of

bullying centered on their apprehensions of reporting for help from teachers, friends, parents and preferred hiding their bullying experiences. The findings of this study find support from the developmental-ecological framework [16]. Mohr [16] argued that the contexts of a child in crisis range from their microsystem (immediate

setting) to macrosystem (cultural values and ideals). Participants' depictions also made these contexts clear. A majority of the victims also reported thoughts about defensive reactivity, which refers to the "proneness to negative emotional reactivity in the face of threat" [17]. Thoughts of taking revenge from the bully and reduced motivation were also evident in depictions of the participants identified as bullied.

In the responses illustrative of thoughts related to dealing with the bullying situation, participants expressed various thoughts about active and passive coping. The current findings are in congruence with the previous research finding that victimized children generally think to speak about their bullying more often to their parents than to their teachers [18] and recommend passive strategies such as avoiding the bullies with a greater likelihood as they have a fear of retaliation by the bullies [19]. These results are consistent with Sittichai and Smith's [20] findings that victims tell a teacher or parent about their bullying and the finding has implications for the pertinent role of duly held parent-teacher meetings in preventing bullying.

Telling others and seeking help when bullied has often been found to be an effective response to bullying [21]. The metacognition that is "thinking about thinking" of bullying the perpetrator, was also clear in the responses of some participants. Metacognition, along with attributional complexity, has a significant effect on resilience [22] and thus facilitates effective adaptation in negative situations, including bullying.

While portraying thoughts related to the reason for bullying, the victims attribute the causes of victimization more to their stable, internal, and global factors which are the most maladaptive ones [23], than to the bullies for just having fun [24] and being strong. The present findings also show that the victims revealed more information when asked to draw and elaborate on their bullying experiences. A scholarly debate regarding the best method for assessing bullying and victimization [25] exists in the bullying literature, and the present findings with the use of drawings along with a semi-structured interview seem to offer a good alternative to the existing conventional methods to assess bullying.

Some limitations of the present study could offer future research scope. First, the study focused on the thoughts of the victims of school bullying only. To further explore this topic, future studies could design the

attribution retraining program. Second, future studies can design and implement the interventional program for victims of school bullying and test their efficacy.

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Conflict of Interest: None

Source of Funding- Self

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics approval was obtained from the school ethical committee. Informed consent was obtained from both the parents and students and the information about anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage were provided to all the participants.

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