

POLICY BRIEF

Bullying and Learning in Arab Countries

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SUMMARY

Bullying may be costly to society and individuals, as it has the potential to affect students' development and academic achievement. Trends in Mathematics and Achievement Study (TIMSS) 2015 data from 4th and 8th grade student questionnaires reveal the incidence of bullying in Arab countries is very high in comparison to most OECD countries, especially in 4th grade. Frequent bullying seems to be more prevalent among males; however, a substantial percentage of females are also frequently bullied. Arab students who reported being bullied often in 4th grade scored significantly lower in mathematics than their counterparts who reported being bullied less frequently. A comprehensive sector response comprising strong legislation, education policies, school leadership, partnerships, services and support, and monitoring and evaluation is necessary to address bullying in the region.

What is Bullying?

Bullying is defined as unwanted aggressive behavior that occurs repeatedly and involves a real or perceived power imbalance.¹ In addition to being detrimental to the individual, bullying is very costly to society, as it may hamper cognitive and non-cognitive skill development, and be linked with violent behaviors in adulthood.² There is also ample evidence that bullying significantly affects class attendance, participation in school activities, and school dropout. This in turn has an adverse impact on academic achievement.³

Bullying Data

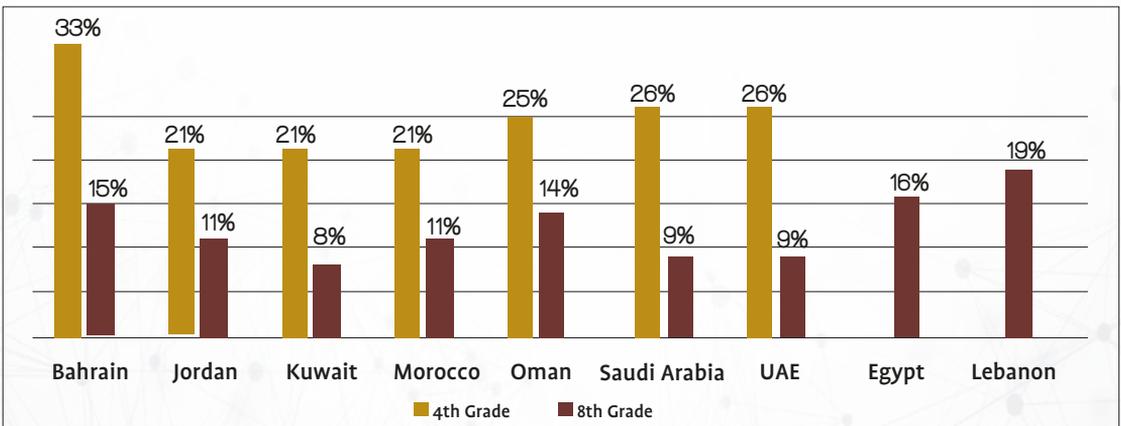
At least four large-scale self-report surveys measure and provide data on the high incidence of bullying cross-nationally: EU Kids Online, Global School Health Survey, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Health Behaviour of School-aged Children. TIMSS 2015 measures bullying by asking 4th and 8th graders about their bullying experiences and frequency. Items that comprise the bullying index and scale ask students how often they experienced the following in 4th grade: (1) made fun of or called names; (2) left out of games or activities; (3) had lies spread about him/her; (4) had something stolen; (5) be made do things s/he did not want to; (6) had embarrassing information shared with others; and (7) suffered threats. Students in 8th grade reported on an additional item: (8) had embarrassing things posted online. Data allows researchers to analyze the percentage of students who experienced specific and overall bullying and their achievement results in mathematics and science.

Findings (TIMSS 2015)

Overall Bullying Frequency

Studies on the prevalence of bullying reveal that Arab countries have some of the highest incidences of bullying in the world.⁴ TIMSS 2015 data from 4th and 8th grade student questionnaires disclose that although a large overall percentage of Arab students were never bullied (43%) or bullied “about monthly” (31%), a sizable percentage of students were bullied “about weekly,” especially in 4th grade (Figure 1). Further, the percentages of frequent bullying among 8th graders are still very high in comparison to most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. For example, the incidences of bullying that happen “about weekly” in Korea among 4th and 8th graders are only 4% and 1%, respectively.

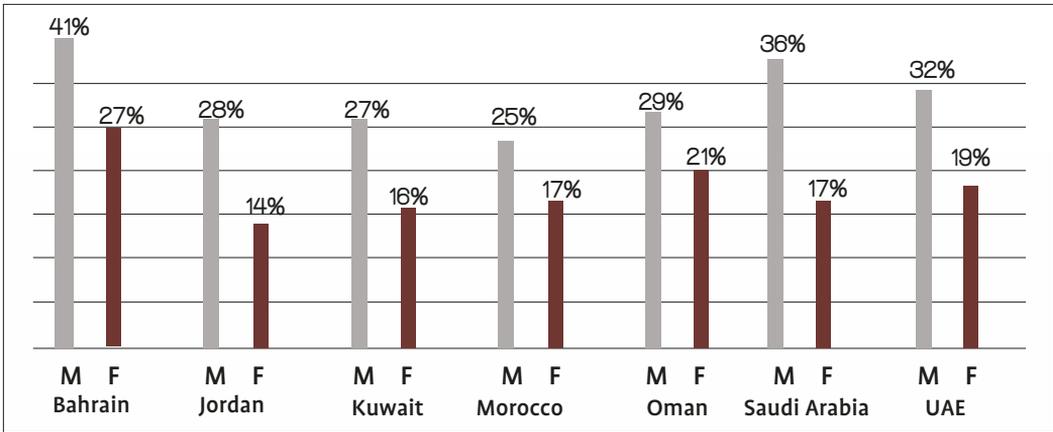
Figure 1: Percentage of Arab Students Bullied “About Weekly” in Grades 4 & 8 (TIMSS 2015).



Gender Differences in 4th Grade

Among males and females who answered the TIMSS student questionnaire in 4th grade, a larger percentage of males than females reported being bullied “about weekly” (Figure 2). In Bahrain, more than 40% of male students reported being bullied “about weekly.” In Saudi Arabia and the UAE, those figures are above 30%. Frequent bullying among females was also prevalent in Bahrain and Oman (above 20%). The most common form of bullying among males and females was “being made fun of or called names” or “being left out of games and activities.” The overall percentage of males and females who specifically reported “being hit or physically hurt” in Arab countries was 24% and 15%, respectively.

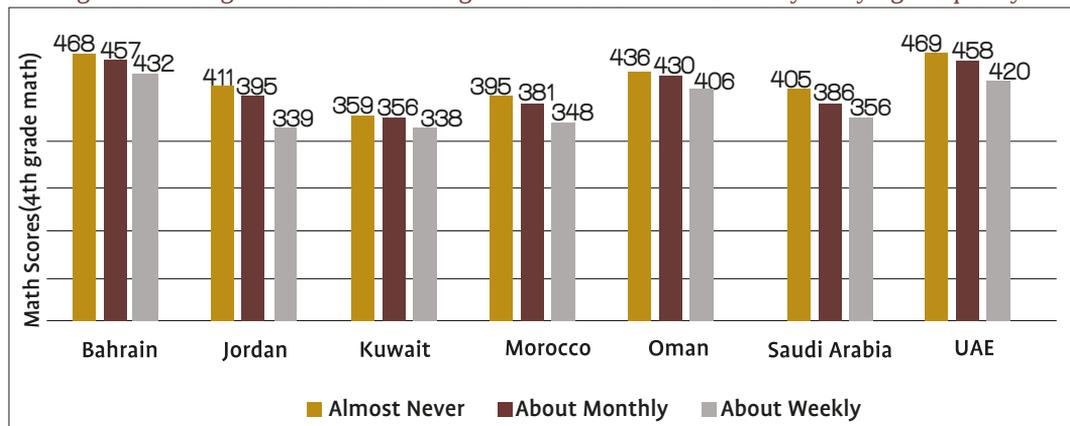
Figure 2: Percentages of Arab Males and Females Bullied “About Weekly” in 4th Grade (TIMSS 2015).



Bullying and Math Performance in 4th Grade

TIMSS data provides information on achievement differences across bullying levels (Figure 3). In Arab countries, there is a clear association between bullying frequency and math scores in 4th grade. Students who reported being bullied “about weekly” scored significantly lower than their counterparts who reported being bullied “almost never” or “about monthly.” In Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, there were also significant differences in math scores between those students who reported being bullied less often. Students who reported being bullied “almost never” scored significantly higher than those who were bullied “about monthly.” Similar associations between bullying and math scores are observed in high-performing countries such as Korea, Japan, and Scandinavian countries, where low levels of bullying are associated with higher performance in mathematics.

Figure 3: Average Math Scores Among Arab Students in 4th Grade by Bullying Frequency



How Can Countries Address Bullying?

Given the high incidence of bullying in the Arab region among 4th graders, the relationship between bullying and students' mathematics scores, and the potential impact of bullying on students' overall development, it is imperative to propose programs and policies to address bullying in Arab countries at an early age. According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report (2017), a comprehensive sector response is necessary to address bullying. The following are initiatives undertaken by several countries around the world that can be emulated in the Arab region:

National Legislation and Supportive Legal Environment.

Involves developing and enforcing laws to protect students from bullying. The Republic of Korea has established an anti-bullying and anti-school violence law, which includes research and education, support through school counseling, and partnership between agencies and educational institutions to protect the human rights of students. Similarly, in Australia, the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), legislated under the Schools Assistance Act 2004, promoted the national approach to combat bullying and violence in schools. Legislation was passed to enable the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner to operate a complaints system to quickly remove harmful cyberbullying material from large social media sites and issue a notice to persons who have posted cyberbullying material.

School Environment

Involves creating a safe environment through strong and inclusive school management that allows victims to come forward and perpetrators to be held accountable. It also involves a curriculum that supports principles of non-violence. The KiVa program in Finland recommends mandatory pre-service teacher training and the training of all staff to prevent and stop bullying in schools. The program is implemented in 90% of Finnish schools and

targets children from 6 –16 years of age. The program has three main elements: (1) Prevention of bullying—KiVa curriculum (student lessons and online games) are directed to all students to prevent bullying; (2) Dealing with cases—actions are taken to put an end to bullying by targeting perpetrators and victims as well as classmates who are encouraged to support the victim; and (3) Monitoring of change and feedback to schools—tools produce annual feedback for each school about program implementation and outcomes. The implementation of this nation-wide anti-bullying program in Finland has provided evidence that a decrease in bullying is associated with positive effects on enjoying school, academic motivation, and achievement.⁶

Partnerships

Involves collaborating with sectors at the national and local level to raise awareness about bullying. In Canada, public service announcements on the theme of bullying are carried out by the Concerned Children’s Advertisers. In Latin America, the Cartoon Network, in cooperation with Plan International and World Vision, sponsors a bullying prevention initiative that builds the capacity of children and parents to deal with bullying and violent behaviors. That initiative has reached 60 million households in the region.

Services and Support

Includes providing reporting mechanisms, counseling, and support for victims of bullying and bystanders. In Lebanon, the Higher Council for Childhood introduced a child e-helpline that established a reporting mechanism with referrals and counseling.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Data is important to quantify the prevalence, costs of school bullying, and the return for prevention and treatment programs. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has generated a database on prevalence of bullying among 11-15 year-olds from six survey programs in 145 countries. The database contributes to the development of agreed-upon indicators, mechanisms, and tools to measure bullying and develop appropriate responses.

Recommendations: Priority Actions ⁷

- Enact legislation, policies, and codes of conduct to create safe learning environments for all children. Allocate resources for effective implementation to prevent and respond to bullying among students.
- Ensure training of teachers, students, school staff, and parents to recognize, prevent, and respond to bullying. Identify opportunities to promote non-violent and respectful behaviors through school curriculum and classroom management.

- Educate all school stakeholders and society by promoting awareness campaigns against school violence and bullying. Establish cross-sector collaboration and involve students in planning and implementing educational campaigns and other anti-bullying initiatives.
- Establish safe reporting mechanisms for victims and bystanders. Provide adequate counseling for them and for perpetrators.
- Invest in monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of anti-bullying interventions.

References and Further Reading

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