Perceptions of Middle School Teachers on Teacher Bullying

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Abstract

Many individuals experience bullying; however, over 42% of college students surveyed reported that their worst experience of bullying in primary through high school was perpetrated by a teacher (Pottinger & Stair, 2009). Informed by current literature and Symbolic Interactionism Theory, we hypothesized that teachers would acknowledge traditional student-student bullying in their school but would lack awareness of specific occurrences of teacher bullying. Strong support was found for this hypothesis. This non-random pilot study surveyed the attitudes of middle school teachers about other teachers who exhibit bully-like behavior towards students. Data was analyzed using the following descriptive statistics: frequencies, mean comparisons, correlations, and Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis. The implications of this study are to provide awareness of teacher bullying and to promote future research of this under-studied type of bullying. Future research recommendations include a larger and random national sample using mixed methods for capturing the lived experience of the teachers in addition to survey data.

Keywords: Teachers as bullies, Bullying prevention, School bullying

Bullying may occur in many forms, but some ways are more detrimental for students than others. For example, just over 42% of college students surveyed believed that their worst experience of bullying in primary through high school was perpetrated by a teacher, most commonly through humiliation and embarrassment (Pottinger & Stair, 2009). A teacher bully is defined as someone who controls and manipulates their students beyond what administration deems an acceptable method (Twemlow & Fonagy, 2006). Most often, teacher bullies

target victims who they are familiar with and spend time with on a regular basis in close surroundings (Beaty, 2008). Over time, being bullied may create increased oppositional conduct in students (Pottinger, 2009). Due to the growing awareness of teacher bullying and its effects on students, there is an increased need for research.

Literature Review

To explore the relationship between teachers and bullying of students, a review of the literature was conducted through the search engine Ebscohost using the key words school bullying, teachers as bullies, and bullying prevention. The search was also limited to studies conducted since the year 2003 to the present, in order to ensure up-to-date data. The literature suggested that overall teachers were unaware of current bullying trends, including teachers who bully students. The literature also indicated that there is a significant relationship between being bullied as a student and later exhibiting bully-like behaviors as a teacher. We defined teacher bullying as "someone who controls and manipulates their students beyond what the school administration deems an acceptable method" (Twemlow, p. 10, 2006). It is also important to know that bullies most often choose victims who they are familiar with and spend time with on a regular basis in close surroundings (Beaty, 2008). Therefore, teachers are more likely to bully the students they see regularly and less likely to bully students they have limited contact with.

As their years of experience increase, teachers are more likely to overlook common incidents of bullying, such as name calling, due to slight acclimatization from handling the same occurrences for a number of years (Beaty, 2008). The same research also found that teachers were generally less aware of bullying incidents than their students. This supports the concept that while teachers are aware of various bullying types, they are less likely to recognize conceptual examples within their classroom. This is also suggested in Kennedy's (2012) study, which found that 70% of students reported being affected by bullying, but only 15-18% of teachers reported that they intervened after observing bullying.

Glasner's (2010) research looked at how teachers observe and identify different types of bullying. The results from this study showed that 61% of teachers recognized bullying due to

training they had previously received. However, 70% of the same teachers only recognized bullying because a student directly reported the incident to them. Forrester (2012) recommends that teachers should know all forms, signs, and effects of bullying, including teacher bullying. Being able to identify the types and severity of bullying is important when teachers face the decision to intervene. Zerillo and Osterman (2011) found that a teacher's choice to intervene was not based on the type of bullying. Instead, the choice whether or not to intervene is generally determined by the severity of the situation.

In 2006, Twemlow et al conducted a quantitative interview protocol regarding teachers' perceptions of bullying. In this study they defined a bullying teacher as someone who controls and manipulates their students beyond what the school administration deems an acceptable method. The research found a significant relationship between how often a teacher was bullied when they were a student and their likelihood to bully their students now. Furthermore, 45% of the teachers surveyed reported that they had bullied a student at least one time in the past. The teachers who claimed to be frequent bullies also reported they felt a lack of support from administration, which was a factor in why they bully. Other factors that contributed to teacher bullying were large class sizes, lack of disciplinary training, and job burnout. Regardless of their own behavior, the teachers agreed that colleagues who bully create a hostile environment in both the classroom and between coworkers.

Research has shown that teachers who had autonomy over their educational methods report increased job satisfaction and less job stress. This is supported by Twemlow (2005), who examined the prevalence of teachers who bully students in comparison to the rate of student suspension in their respective schools. Included in this study were 214 teachers from 15 different schools. There were significant differences between the schools depending on the levels of suspensions. Teachers who worked in schools with high suspension rates reported that they observed or participated in teacher bullying. The opposite was true in low level suspension schools; there were fewer instances of teacher bullying. This suggests that a reported stressful work environment can increase the likelihood of teacher bullying (Twemlow, 2005). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) looked at different strain factors: perceived teacher efficacy and job burnout.

They found a strong correlation between the perception of teaching efficacy and burnout rates. Teachers who felt they were effectively teaching and dealing with students were less likely to experience burnout. This suggests that both positive attitudes and support from administration can help prevent teacher strain, which has been correlated with teacher-to-student bullying. One recommendation that may deter teacher bullying is to promote a positive classroom by teaching students positive self-concepts, anger management strategies, and conflict resolution skills (Forrester, 2012).

Current literature has shown the impacts of bullying on students from both peer and teacher bullying. Literature has also shown the ability to identify and prevent student-to-student bullying, but there is limited research regarding teachers' abilities to identify and prevent teacher-to-student bullying. There is limited research about teachers' attitudes towards teacher bullying and also limited research on the harmful psychological effects that teacher-to-student bullying can create for students. (Duong et al, 2013; Kennedy et al, 2012; McCarra et al, 2012; Zerillo 2011; Glasner, 2010; Pottinger, 2009; Beaty, 2008; Skaalvik, 2007; Twemlow et al, 2006; Twemlow, 2005). The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the attitudes of teachers in relation to teachers who exhibit bully-like behavior in hopes to promote further research on preventing teacher bullying.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to form the foundation of this study was Symbolic Interactionism Theory. This theory argues that people develop their perspectives based on personal experiences, personal interactions, and self-perception (Ingoldsby, Smith and Miller, 2003). Symbolic Interactionism Theory is one of the most broadly used theories in family studies and therefore has many different interpretations. These interpretations vary based on the researcher and the type of research being conducted; however, there are commonalities among all definitions. First, people react only to things that have meaning to them and how they define its meaning. Second, the way we view ourselves and the way we desire the world to see ourselves both influence personal behavior. Finally, societal views also have an impact on an individual's perception of the self and the perception of meaning

(Ingoldsby, 2003).

When applied to our study, Symbolic Interactionism Theory would assume that teachers expect interactions between themselves and students to be socially normal within their role as a teacher in any given situation (Ingoldsby, 2003). According to Kennedy, Russom, and Kevorkian (2012), approximately 90% of teachers believed that part of their role as a teacher is to prevent bullying. Current bullying prevention programs almost entirely focus on student-to-student bullying and lack significant information on bullying that occurs between a teacher and student (Sylvester, 2011). Based on Symbolic Interactionism Theory, we predicted teachers' observations of other teachers who exhibit bully-like behavior towards students would be of low frequency.

Hypothesis

The central research question in this study was: "What are the perceptions of middle school teachers on teachers who bully?" We hypothesized that teachers would acknowledge bullying in their school but would lack awareness of specific occurrences of teacher bullying. Because teachers view themselves as participants in bullying prevention programs that focus on student-to-student bullying, they will not actively look for other teachers who exhibit bullying behaviors. This assumption is based on Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which suggests that because their roles generally do not include the tolerance of bullying, teachers assume that teacher bullying does not occur (Ingoldsby et al, 2003).

Method

Participants

This study was conducted at a rural Wisconsin middle school. The participants included five female middle school teachers. Please see demographics below.

Gender	Age	Years Teaching
Female = 5	20-30 years = 1	6-10 years = 1
	31-40 years = 2	11-15 years = 1
	41-50 years = 1	16-20 years = 3
	51-60 years = 1	

Research Design

The purpose of this non-random survey research was to evaluate teachers' perceptions of middle school teachers who bully students. We used a cross-sectional research design in order to examine the attitudes of the participants towards teacher bullying at one point in time. Paper survey questionnaires were used to collect the data. The justification for using this method was that paper questionnaires were requested by the school's principal and for convenience purposes.

The sampling design used in our study was non-random, purposive and snowball. We had a "purpose" in identifying a specific middle school to access its teachers and their perceptions of teacher bullying. Additionally, the study utilized a snowball sampling design. We secured collaboration for sampling through both researchers' past experiences as volunteer tutors in the school knowing that without this connection we were unlikely to gain collaboration given the controversial nature of the research question. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The ethical protection of human subjects was provided through completion of the IRB's Human Subjects training.

Data Collection Instrument

The survey was designed to examine teachers' perspectives of teacher bullying. The survey included a brief description of the study, definition of terms not commonly known, risks, benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary

participation, our contact information as well as our supervisor's contact information, and instructions for completing the survey. Statements and questions for the survey were developed by reviewing literature and by applying Symbolic Interactionism Theory.

Procedure

The process began when we emailed the principal of a rural Wisconsin middle school to explain our research and asked if the school would be willing to collaborate. The principal responded to our email with permission to survey the teachers if she could review the survey prior to distribution. The survey questionnaire was hand-delivered to the school and was administered to the teachers by the principal, who followed specific protocol that was provided by the researchers. The implied consent form was attached to the survey. We did not attempt to randomize our sample because the population was inaccessible and every participant was crucial to data collection. Data collection began March 25, 2013 and ended March 28, 2013.

Data Analysis Plan

The survey data was first collected, cleaned, and checked for missing data. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms. Demographics were given a three-letter acronym: Gender of the participants (GEN); Age of the participants (AGE); and Number of years teaching (TTT); All survey statements were also given a three-letter acronym: I believe that there are teachers who bully students at this school (TOP); I have noticed that other teachers have disparaging labels for some students. These may include but are not limited to labels such as dumb, stupid, incompetent, trouble, behind or a handful (IND); I have observed teachers being disrespectful towards students. For example, making sarcastic remarks, being discouraged, or being rude toward students (DIS); I am aware of at least one situation in the past month where a teacher bullied a student (PMO); I am aware of at least one situation in the past year where a teacher bullied a student (PYR); I am aware of other teachers who show favoritism in their interactions with students such as accepting late work for some while rejecting others (STE); I am aware of other teachers who use humiliation to stop classroom disruption by using personal put downs, sarcasm, or isolation of students (HUM); I feel that teachers should have a significant role in

addressing teachers who bully students (INT); Our school has policies and procedures in place to address teachers who bully students (POL); If I were to observe another teacher bullying a student I would know how to intervene in the best interest of that student (ITC).

The data was analyzed using the computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*. Groups were not compared during this study. The methods of data analysis used included frequencies, mean comparisons, and correlations. Cronbach's alpha reliability was also conducted as a means of analysis for this study. All variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data.

Results

We hypothesized that we would find a higher level of response from teachers regarding their awareness of teacher bullying (TOP), but also that teachers would be unable to point out specific occurrences of teacher bullying (PMO). The data supported our hypothesis in that 100% of teachers either slightly agreed or agreed that there was a prevalence of teacher bullying within their school (TOP). Sixty percent of teachers reported slightly agreeing or agreeing that they had seen a teacher bullying a student in the past month (PMO). Support is provided in the Frequency Distribution, Table 1. See A for full Frequency Distribution.

Variable	SD	D	SLD	SLA	A	SA	Total
TOP	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
IND	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
PMO	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%
PYR	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	20.0%	100.0%

We did not run Correlations due to having an N<10. Cronbach's Alpha reliability in this analysis was 0.925. This value indicated that the survey questions were a reliable measure of the major concept (teacher bullying). Qualitative comments were not received at the end of any of our surveys.

Discussion

Support was found for both parts of our hypothesis. In our study, 100% of teachers reported awareness of teacher-to-student bullying, but only 60% reported awareness of a specific incident of teacher bullying. Findings for our hypothesis were supported by theory and literature. The Symbolic Interactionism Theory suggests that because teacher roles do not tolerate bullying, they will assume that bullying by teachers does not occur (Ingoldsby et al, 2003).

This study's frequency distribution demonstrated that participants unanimously reported that they either slightly agreed or agreed that there were teachers at the school who bully. There was also support that teachers lack awareness of specific occurrences of teacher bullying. Forty percent of respondents strongly disagreed that they were aware of a specific occurrence of teacher bullying within the past month. Forty percent of respondents also strongly disagreed that they were aware of a specific occurrence of teacher bullying within the past year. This supports our hypothesis that teachers believed there was a prevalence of teacher bullying in their school, but were unable to pinpoint specific occurrences of bullying.

Forty-two percent of college students have reported that their worst experience of bullying from a teacher in primary through high school was most often due to embarrassment or humiliation (Pottinger & Stair, 2009). This statement is supported in our results as 80% of the participants slightly agreed or agreed that teachers have labels such as dumb, stupid, incompetent, trouble, behind, or "a handful," that they gave to certain students. It is important to understand that these labels for students are used to mask or deflect teacher bullying behaviors (Sylvester, 2010).

Limitations

Some limitations of this non-random pilot study are its small sample size, lack of demographic diversity, and time allotted for survey completion. This study included only five participants; therefore the results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Surveys were only distributed for four days, which limited the number of surveys completed and returned. Implications for Practitioners The implications of this study will be helpful to professionals working in educational fields in regards to preventing and acknowledging teacher bullying. The

data indicated that 100% of the participants believed there were teachers at their school who bully. Administration should provide training to staff and students on recognizing, preventing, and intervening on teacher bullying. Policies that specifically address teacher bullying should be considered as part of standard bullying policies already in place.

Implications for Future Research

Recommendations for future research would include a larger and random national sample to be able to generalize findings. Also, extending time for survey completion would allow for higher return rates. Students, administration, and other working staff at educational institutions should also be included for a more complete perspective on teacher bullying. If this survey is used again, we suggest additional questions on perceived bullying actions mixed with qualitative interviews to investigate the perceptions and experience of teachers and students. As it was successful in Doung's study (2013), we also suggest utilizing an online survey administered by someone who is not affiliated with participants' employment so that they can be less concerned about repercussions for their participation. We believe that utilizing a web-based survey would allow more accessibility for more participants.

Conclusion

This study examined teachers' awareness of other teachers who bully students. As stated in current literature, just over 42% of college students surveyed believed that their worst experience of bullying in primary through high school was perpetrated by a teacher, most commonly through humiliation and embarrassment (Pottinger & Stair, 2009). Our research found that 100% of teachers overall were in agreement that teachers are bullying students. Previous research has found that being bullied over time creates the potential for increased oppositional conduct in students. Some examples of oppositional conduct include noncompliance, irritability, and a lack of respect for authority (Pottinger, 2009). Because being bullied by a teacher can have lasting effects on a student, it is important to continue researching the topic of teaching bullying.

Additionally, the literature suggested that overall teachers were unaware of current bullying trends, including a lack of

awareness about teacher bullying. Since many students have reported that their worst experience of bullying was perpetrated by a teacher, it is important to include teacher-to-student bullying when discussing bullying. It is also important to include teacher bullying in the formation and implementation of policies in order to protect students from this type of abuse (Pottinger & Stair, 2009).

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Appendix A

Frequency Distribution

Variable

	SD	D	SLD	SLA	A	SA	Total
TOP	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
IND	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
DIS	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%
PMO	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%
PYR	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%	20.0%	100.0%
STE	40.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%
HUM	20.0%	0.0%	20.0%	40.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%
INT	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	40.0%	40.0%	100.0%
POL	20.0%	0.0%	20.0%	20.0%	40.0%	0.0%	100.0%
ITC	20.0%	0.0%	20.0%	20.0%	20.0%	20.0%	100.0%

Note. I believe that there are teachers who bully students at this school (TOP); I have noticed that other teachers have disparaging labels for some students. These may include but are not limited to labels such as dumb, stupid, incompetent, trouble, behind or a handful (IND); I have observed teachers being disrespectful towards students. For example, making sarcastic remarks, being discouraged, or being rude toward students (DIS); I am aware of at least one situation in the past month where a teacher bullied a student (PMO); I am aware of at least one situation in the past year where a teacher bullied a student (PYR); I am aware of other teachers who show favoritism in their interactions with students such as accepting late work for some while rejecting others (STE); I am aware of other teachers who use humiliation to stop classroom disruption by using personal put downs, sarcasm, or isolation of students (HUM); I feel that teachers should have a significant role in addressing teachers who bully students (INT); Our school has policies and procedures in place to address teachers who bully students (POL); If I were to observe another teacher bullying a student I would know how to intervene in the best interest of that student (ITC).

Appendix B

Compare Means

	TOP	IND	DIS	PMO	PYR	STE	HUM	INT	POL	ITC
Mean	4.40	4.00	3.80	3.00	3.20	2.20	3.40	5.20	3.60	3.00
SD	0.55	1.22	0.84	1.87	2.05	1.64	1.52	0.84	1.67	1.58
Range	1.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	2.00	4.00	4.00

Note. I believe that there are teachers who bully students at this school (TOP); I have noticed that other teachers have disparaging labels for some students. These may include but are not limited to labels such as dumb, stupid, incompetent, trouble, behind or a handful (IND); I have observed teachers being disrespectful towards students. For example, making sarcastic remarks, being discouraged, or being rude toward students (DIS); I am aware of at least one situation in the past month where a teacher bullied a student (PMO); I am aware of at least one situation in the past year where a teacher bullied a student (PYR); I am aware of other teachers who show favoritism in their interactions with students such as accepting late work for some while rejecting others (STE); I am aware of other teachers who use humiliation to stop classroom disruption by using personal put downs, sarcasm, or isolation of students (HUM); I feel that teachers should have a significant role in addressing teachers who bully students (INT); Our school has policies and procedures in place to address teachers who bully students (POL); If I were to observe another teacher bullying a student I would know how to intervene in the best interest of that student (ITC).