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Elements Contributing to Teachers' Role in Bullying

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Importance of Teachers' Role in Bullying

The Importance of Teachers' Role in Bullying

Bullying is an ongoing phenomenon with detrimental consequences and occurs in all schools (Arseneault, 2017; Cook et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2017; Wolke et al., 2013). Bullying has been defined as aggressive behavior with bullies intentionally and repeatedly harming victims, who are physically or socially weaker (Olweus, 1993a; Volk et al., 2014). Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting or pushing), verbal (e.g., name-calling), relational (e.g., exclusion or gossiping), material (e.g., damaging belongings) and increasingly online (e.g., sending harmful text messages to the victim, taking pictures or videos of the victim and spreading them online) (Kwan et al., 2020). Bullying occurs in many places in the school, but most often at unsupervised contexts such as playgrounds or in the classroom when teachers are not present (Dake et al., 2004; Veenstra et al., 2014).

Over the last decades, perceptions regarding bullying and victimization changed from being a 'childhood experience' and 'innocent playing' to a serious and harmful phenomenon. This change is reflected in the increasing attention in research to bullying and victimization and its negative outcomes, the development of anti-bullying programs, and policies and legal obligations to deal with bullying (Arseneault, 2017; Olweus, 2013). Where a few decades ago, bullying was perceived as a problem between the bully and victim, the focus in both research and policies shifted to bullying as a group process. The collective character of bullying, which happens in a group context where interactions among students reinforce behaviors, were pointed out by several studies. In addition to bullies and victims, there are also reinforcers and assistants of bullies, defenders of victims, and outsiders, who withdraw and passively allow bullying to continue (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Teachers have an important role in reducing the detrimental consequences of bullying, through guiding and steering group processes. Teachers are also part of the group, but have a

different position than students because they have the authority and ability to identify, prevent, and reduce bullying in schools. Teachers can be seen as key agents in preventing and reducing school bullying (Dan Olweus, 1993a, 1996; Smith et al., 2004). However, teachers often experience difficulties or lack the self-confidence to identify, prevent, and reduce bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Craig, Henderson, et al., 2000b; Skinner et al., 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003), which was reflected by a great variety in teachers' efforts to implement an anti-bullying program or intervene in bullying situations (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Veenstra et al., 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). This dissertation examines individual and contextual characteristics contributing to teachers' likelihood to intervene in bullying.

Research on Teachers' Role in Tackling Bullying

Even though there have been quite some studies on teachers in relation to tackling bullying, at the start of this dissertation it became clear that this research was limited compared to the large body of research on bullying and victimization. Moreover, research on teachers' effort tackling bullying concerned a broad variety of factors, often measured in different ways, and lacking consistency or a common underlying theory. These observations made clear why it was hard to explain or summarize the teacher factors that contributed to the variety in their implementation- and prevention efforts, which demanded for a more systematic approach.

The first aim of this dissertation was therefore to investigate the whole range of possible factors systematically through developing a theoretical framework which integrated the various research strands on teachers' role in tackling bullying. Because such a framework did not exist at the start, it became the point of departure of this dissertation. A theoretical framework could, serve as a basis to integrate existing research, and as a basis for data collection. Additionally, the outcome of such a framework should not only be teachers'

perceptions of their own behavior and effectiveness, but additional research should also examine whether and to what extent teachers' effort matter to their students' experiences with bullying involvement.

There have been several approaches on collecting data on teachers' effort identifying, preventing, and reducing bullying. Previous research has used teachers' self-reports as an indicator of their attitudes toward bullying, their self-confidence in intervening in bullying situations, and their intervention behavior (Barnes et al., 2012; Fischer & Bilz, 2019; Garner et al., 2013; O'Brennan et al., 2014; Yoon et al., 2016). In addition, vignettes were used to assess teachers' seriousness, empathy with the victim, and likelihood to intervene, which they scored after reading written vignettes (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Duy, 2013; Yoon, 2004) or watching video vignettes depicting a variety of bullying situations and types (Yoon et al., 2016). Some studies complemented data from teachers with data from students reports, such as students' self-reported bullying and victimization (Harks & Hannover, 2019; Rigby, 2020; van der Zanden et al., 2015), or included school context information (Hall & Dawes, 2019; Harger, 2019; Mishna et al., 2005). The chapters of this dissertation make use of three different datasets, using data collected among teachers through online and offline questionnaires, including written vignettes, and in Chapter 5, data was obtained from both teachers and students.

Consequences of bullying

Teachers' efforts in preventing and reducing bullying are not only important to benefit academic achievement for children, but also contribute to the prevention and reduction of negative consequences of bullying for their students. First, victims of bullying were shown to have lower academic performances, and an elevated risk to develop internalizing problems relating to mental health, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicide (see for an overview:

Arseneault, 2017). Childhood victimization can also have consequences in adult life: previous research found higher levels of mental health problems, poorer self-ratings of health, lower educational attainment, higher likelihood to be unemployed and have lower earnings than peers, and an increased risk to live without a spouse or partner at the age of 50 (Arseneault, 2017; Olweus, 2013; Takizawa et al., 2014; Wolke et al., 2013).

Like victims, bullies also have an elevated chance of psychiatric problems on the short as well as the long term (Wolke et al., 2013). Additionally, bullies were shown to be more involved in criminal activities later in life, have higher chances of developing an anti-social personality disorder, and more likely to have mental health issues (Olweus, 2013; Wolke et al., 2013). Finally, bystanders and witnesses of bullying reported increased levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and negative influences on their daily emotional lives (Midgett & Dumas, 2019; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005).

These negative consequences of bullying are not only applicable to individual bullies, victims, and other involved students, but also to society as a whole. Previous research found bullies and victims made more use of mental health services and achieved lower levels of education compared to their peers (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017; Wolke et al., 2013). Both bullies and victims appeared to have lower earnings in later life, and an increased chance of being impoverished, which might be a result of the negative effects of bullying involvement on human capital accumulation (Brown & Taylor, 2008). These findings emphasize the importance of teachers' role in preventing bullying, or reducing its prevalence in the classrooms and schoolyards. Investing in bullying prevention and reduction can therefore be considered as a good value for money (Huising et al., 2020; McDaid et al., 2017; Persson & Svensson, 2013).

Anti-bullying programs

The increasing attention to bullying and alarming findings of its prevalence and consequences, deemed for the development of ways to prevent and reduce bullying, like anti-bullying programs. The first whole-school anti-bullying program was the Olweus Bullying Prevention Plan, developed and evaluated in Norway by Dan Olweus, and later adjusted and implemented in the United States. Currently, many anti-bullying programs have been developed, with mixed results in their effectiveness to reduce bullying (Gaffney et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2020). Many of these programs are whole-school programs, characterized by consistent school-wide policies for bullying, classroom activities or lessons promoting anti-bullying attitudes, interventions for students who are involved in bullying, and providing information on bullying for teachers, students, and parents (Ryan & Smith, 2009).

Teachers play an important role in implementing these programs, and are often trained by professionals at the start of the school year (Gaffney et al., 2019). The whole-school approach requires a change of the entire school culture and organization. Teachers do not only learn about bullying during the initial training, but can also deepen their understanding of bullying while delivering anti-bullying lessons (Ahtola et al., 2012). The underlying assumption is that after being trained, teachers deliver the anti-bullying activities and lessons in their classroom accordingly. However, previous research also demonstrated heterogeneity in teachers' likelihood to intervene in bullying situations, and the extent to which they implemented anti-bullying activities and delivered program lessons (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Haataja et al., 2015). This suggests that part of the variety in effectiveness of anti-bullying programs might be explained by teachers' behavior, and raises the question which elements play a role in teachers' decision-making to tackle bullying and implement elements of the program.

Research Questions and Overview of this Dissertation

The aim of this dissertation was to develop and examine a theoretical framework serving as a fundament for research on characteristics playing a role in teachers' efforts to tackle bullying. The research question guiding this dissertation reads *"What research has been done on teachers' role in tackling bullying, and which factors play a role in teachers' behavior to intervene?"*

To answer this question, four studies were set up, making use of different datasets and methods. Table 1.1 provides an overview. All datasets have in common that they were administered among teachers, who filled out surveys answering questions on bullying, and their attitudes, perceptions, and behavior in relation to bullying.

A systematic review was set up in **Chapter 2** to examine the state-of-the-art in research on teachers' role in tackling school bullying. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, a conceptual framework was developed, which served as basis to categorize studies. Studies that were eligible for inclusion concerned primary schools, empirical data on teachers, and focused on teachers' attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors in relation to bullying. The final selection contained 69 studies, which were reviewed systematically.

In **Chapter 3**, the core elements of the proposed theoretical framework were tested empirically. A survey was developed including the key variables from the framework, and data were collected among 180 Dutch primary and secondary school teachers. The study focused on four predictors; 1) teachers' attitudes toward bullying, how serious they took bullying, and empathy with the victim; 2) teachers' behavioral control, referring to self-efficacy and attribution style; 3) teachers' subjective norms, referring to team- and leadership perceptions; 4) teachers' knowledge of bullying. The study examined the association of these four key

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elements with teachers self-reported likelihood to intervene, measured by their answers to written bullying vignettes.

The developed theoretical framework and the test of its core elements provide insights in teacher characteristics that might play a role in the variety of their likelihood to intervene and their effectiveness. However, they do not explain differences found in previous research between primary and secondary schools in the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs (Yeager et al., 2015). Because teachers are key agents in the implementation and delivery of anti-bullying programs, a potential factor explaining these differences might be the subjective norms on the school culture being present in schools amongst team members.

Chapter 4 examines differences in the school culture, referring to the prevailing values, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that are shared by school members. In Study 1 of Chapter 4, the general school culture was analyzed among primary and secondary school teachers from fourteen countries worldwide, using the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018. In Study 2, data from 180 Dutch primary and secondary school teachers were used, to examine differences between primary and secondary school teachers on six specific subscales of school culture.

Whilst chapters 2, 3, and 4 investigated teachers' elements in relation to their self-reported likelihood to intervene, the final aim of this dissertation was to examine whether and how teachers mattered for their students. Previous research suggested that bullies and victims generally have a lower self-esteem than their uninvolved peers (van Geel et al., 2018). Low self-esteem can contribute to more serious mental health issues and lower academic performance (Tsaousis, 2016). The question guiding **Chapter 5**, was therefore whether teachers could potentially buffer part of the negative consequences of bullying and victimization on students' self-esteem, by first, being self-confident in intervening in bullying

(their self-efficacy), and secondly, fostering a good relationship with their students. The study used both data from 59 Dutch teachers, and their 1,490 5th grade students. Multilevel regression analysis were used to examine the potential direct and buffering relations between teachers' self-efficacy and the self-esteem of both bullies and victims. Similar models were estimated for the student-teacher relationship in relation to bullies' and victims' self-esteem.

In **Chapter 6**, a general discussion was provided on the findings of the four studies, with a more in-depth discussion on teachers' self-efficacy and subjective norms. Moreover, both scientific and societal implications of this dissertation are discussed, and directions for further research are given.

Table 1.1 Overview of the data and key variables used in this dissertation

Aim	Dataset	Method & Participants	Analytical model
<p>Chapter 2 1) provide an overview of research on teachers' role in tackling bullying; 2) develop a theoretical framework</p>	69 studies from 15 countries	Selection based on inclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The quality of included studies was assessed with the Newcastle-Ottawa Quality Assessment
<p>Chapter 3 Simultaneously test the main elements of Chapter's 2 framework as predictors of teachers' likelihood to intervene</p>	Dutch Teachers and Bullying - The Netherlands (August-October 2019)	Multilevel regression analysis; 180 teachers from 15 schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Multilevel regression analyses on teachers' likelihood to intervene predicted by teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, subjective norms, and knowledge on bullying
<p>Chapter 4 1) examine differences in general school culture between primary and secondary school teachers in fourteen countries worldwide (Study 1).</p>	Study 1: TALIS - Worldwide (fall 2017 - spring 2018)	Study 1: multilevel linear regression analysis; 97,609 teachers from 14 countries;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study 1: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Differences in perceived general school culture

<p>2) examine these differences in more detail using six specific subscales of perceived school culture (Study 2).</p>	<p>Study 2: Dutch Teachers and Bullying - difference tests; 180 teachers from 15 schools (August - October 2019)</p> <p>Study 2: Multilevel difference tests; 180 teachers from 15 schools</p> <p>Study 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Differences between primary- and secondary school teachers in perceived management elements: i) leadership; ii) shared decision-making; and team-factors; iii) collegiality; iv) consensus; v) confidence/trust; vi) collective efficacy
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Chapter 5

<p>Investigate associations between teachers' self-efficacy, student-teacher-relationships, and students' self-esteem</p>	<p>Our classroom is OK! - Multilevel regression modelling; 59 teachers and 1,490 students from 41 Dutch primary schools.</p> <p>Students' self-esteem predicted by i) students' self-reported bullying and victimization; ii) teachers' self-reported efficacy; iii) students' reported teacher-relationship</p>
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