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Article

Are elementary school teachers prepared to tackle bullying? A pilot study

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Abstract
The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers were prepared to tackle bullying. Interview data from 22 Dutch elementary school teachers (M age $= 43.3$, 18 classrooms in eight schools) were combined with survey data from 373 students of these teachers (M age $= 10.7$, grades 3–6, ages 8- to 12-years-old, 52.2% boys). The teachers in this study gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom, suggesting that even though teachers are supposed to have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. Implications for future research are discussed.

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Elementary school teachers are responsible not only for students' cognitive development, but also for tackling social issues in the classroom. A particularly challenging social issue with which teachers are regularly confronted is bullying (Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002; Oldenburg et al., 2015; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). Tackling bullying is a difficult task (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004) and it is unclear whether teachers are fully prepared for this task. The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers are prepared to tackle bullying, possibly paving the way for future research on this topic. We argue that at least three conditions have to be met before teachers can successfully intervene in bullying situations in their classroom: *First*, teachers need to know what bullying is; *second*, they need to gather information about the bullying among their students; and *third*, they need to recognize when certain students are being victimized.

Teachers' definitions of bullying

Bauman and Del Rio (2005) argued that the education and training of teachers should begin with a clear definition of bullying to prepare them for their job. School bullying is commonly defined as systematic and intentional behavior directed towards students who find it difficult to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Furthermore, scholars agree that bullying can manifest itself in different forms. These core elements (i.e. systematic, intentional, power difference, and different forms) distinguish bullying from other negative social interactions such as teasing or fighting.

Nearly all previous studies investigating elementary school teachers' definitions of bullying focused on the different forms in which bullying can manifest itself. These studies found that teachers are less likely to perceive indirect forms of bullying (e.g. relational bullying such as gossiping) than direct forms (e.g. physical bullying such as hitting or kicking) as bullying (Asimopoulos, Bibou-Nakou, Hatzipemou, Soumaki, & Tsiantis, 2014; Boulton, 1997). The Bauman and Del Rio (2005) study comes closest to investigating to what extent elementary school teachers' definitions of bullying include the four core elements. These researchers investigated 83 trainee teachers and concluded that the majority of these trainee teachers did not have a clear understanding of the definition of bullying.

Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying

To our knowledge, no studies explicitly investigated how teachers find out about bullying among their students. It is plausible that teachers obtain this information either by directly observing bullying behavior or by receiving information from others (e.g. students, parents, or colleagues). Studies on school bullying suggest that it is difficult for teachers to directly observe bullying because it tends to occur when teachers are not present or when it is difficult to keep an eye on all students

(Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Moreover, obtaining information from the students that were involved in bullying may also be challenging. Victims of bullying are often reluctant to inform their teachers about bullying because they feel ashamed, are afraid of potential reprisals from the bullies, or fear their reports might be dismissed as non-credible (Novick & Isaacs, 2010; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Likewise, students who witnessed bullying may not inform their teachers because they fear reprisals from the bullies or other classmates if they do so.

Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying

Even if teachers know what bullying is and have information about what is going on in their classroom, they may still interpret it as playing or other innocent childhood behavior (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Previous studies investigated teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of bullying by comparing teachers' and students' reports on the *general prevalence of victimization* in the classroom. These studies found that these reports differed substantially from each other. For instance, Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) found that whereas teachers believed that they were sufficiently aware of the bullying in their classroom their students thought teachers were only aware of a fraction of all the incidents of bullying.

  We argue that studies investigating teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of bullying should not only focus on the *general prevalence of victimization* but also on the *victimization of individual students*. It is important to know whether teachers perceive students who were victimized as victims, because when teachers do not perceive these students as being victimized, it is unlikely that they will intervene and help them.

Pilot study

Interview data from 22 Dutch elementary school teachers (*M* age = 43.3, 18 classrooms in eight schools) were combined with survey data from 373 students of these same teachers (*M* age = 10.7, grades 3–6, ages 8- to 12-years-old, 52.2% boys). The data were part of a larger ongoing project aiming to evaluate the effectiveness of the Dutch version of the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program (see Kärnä et al., 2011). A detailed description of the sampling procedure, measurements, and results is available as Supplementary Material.

Teachers' definitions of bullying

The teachers in our study were asked to define bullying. Even though they had been participating in the KiVa Program for at least one year, and throughout the program the core elements of bullying were regularly emphasized (see Kärnä et al., 2011), none of the teachers could provide a complete definition of bullying.

The element 'systematic' was mentioned by nearly all teachers, but the elements 'power difference' and 'intention to harm' were mentioned only a few times. Less than half of the teachers mentioned that bullying can manifest itself in a variety of forms. Both physical and verbal bullying were mentioned by a majority of the teachers. Teachers in the pilot study were thus aware that bullying can not only manifest itself by, for instance kicking or hitting, but also by name-calling. In line with previous studies (Asimopoulos et al., 2014; Boulton, 1997), relational bullying was mentioned less frequently than physical and verbal bullying.

Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying

About one-quarter of the teachers mentioned observing their students as a strategy to find out how their students are feeling. About three-quarters of the teachers in this study indicated they talked to their students (in private or in groups) to find out about their well-being. Students who, according to their self-reports, were being victimized were asked in the questionnaire whether and whom they had told about their victimization. Most victimized students indicated they had not informed their teacher about their victimization.

Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying

Teachers were provided with a list of names of the students in their classroom and were asked to indicate victimized students. Teachers' victim nominations were compared with their students' self-reported victimization. The global victimization item of the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) was used to measure students' self-reported victimization. The correspondence between teachers' victim nominations and students' self-reported victimization was low. Only one-quarter of all the self-reported victims were nominated by their teachers. Several teachers expressed doubt concerning whether their students were actually victimized and some teachers remarked that certain students felt victimized, but that these students were not actually being victimized. Moreover, half of the teachers also nominated students who according to their self-reports were not victimized as victims.

Our sample contained four pairs of teachers who taught in the same classroom. The teachers who shared a classroom spent approximately an equal amount of time with their students (e.g. one teacher worked two days per week and the other teacher worked three days per week). In general, the victim nominations of these pairs of teachers showed little overlap. For example, one teacher did not nominate any student as victimized whereas the other teacher in the same classroom nominated four students as victimized. This finding underlines the need for teaching partners to discuss their students regularly. However, the teachers in our study generally did not discuss their students' well-being and behavior in a structural way, but only when problems occurred.

Discussion and implications for future research

The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers were prepared to tackle bullying. The results suggest that even though teachers are supposed to have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. It is disconcerting to find that even teachers who were participating in an anti-bullying program, and thus were likely to be better trained and informed than teachers in schools without such a program, gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom. However, due to the explorative character of this study, these findings must be interpreted tentatively. We hope that future studies will attempt replication of our findings using a larger representative sample. In the following sections we provide detailed suggestions for future research.

Teachers' definitions of bullying

Although all teachers in our study were participating in the KiVa Antibullying Program and throughout the program ample attention was given to the definition of bullying, none of the teachers could provide a complete definition of bullying. We believe it is important that future studies follow-up on this finding and investigate whether teachers indeed do not have a clear understanding of what bullying is. In addition, we suggest that future studies investigate whether certain teachers (e.g. teachers with more teaching experience or who have a personal history of victimization) know better what bullying is than others. Finally, future studies could investigate whether and how teachers' incorrect or incomplete definitions of bullying can be changed. Bullying is most likely a topic with which most, if not all, teachers have at least some professional and personal experience (Huitsing, 2014). It is plausible that based on these experiences teachers have constructed beliefs on bullying that are not easily changed—not even by participating in an anti-bullying program. Perhaps teachers are more likely to consider new information about bullying when they are made aware that in the past years numerous studies have investigated school bullying, leading to a better understanding of this phenomenon with the consequence that certain earlier ideas on bullying became outdated (e.g. that bullying makes the victim stronger).

Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying

Perhaps because it is difficult to directly observe bullying (Craig et al., 2000; Fekkes et al., 2005) only a few teachers mentioned this as a strategy to find out how their students are feeling. Talking to students was more often mentioned as a strategy, but consistent with the study of Whitney and Smith (1993) most victimized students indicated that they did not inform their teacher about their victimization. Future studies can explore two solutions for this paradox. First, future studies could

investigate ways to take away students' reluctance to inform their teacher about their victimization. Second, future studies may examine alternative strategies to find out about bullying. For instance, given that the victimized students in the pilot study were likely to talk to their friends and family members about the victimization, teachers would perhaps be more successful in finding out about bullying when they talk more often to victims' friends within the school and victims' family members. Moreover, teachers who teach in the same classroom may be better informed when they discuss their students' behavior and well-being structurally. The need for teaching partners to discuss their students regularly is underlined by the finding that teachers who taught in the same classroom did not perceive the same students as victimized.

Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying

We argue that when teachers do not perceive specific students as victimized, it is unlikely that they will intervene and help them. This pilot study suggests that teachers did not recognize their students' self-reported victimization. We suggest that future studies consider the following possible explanations for why teachers may not give victimization nominations to self-reported victims. First, teachers might be unaware of the victimization in their classroom. Second, students may over-report their victimization, for instance because they misperceive certain behavior as bullying (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Third, teachers may prefer to ignore the bullying or assure themselves (and the interviewer) that it is not really bullying. Teachers who are frequently confronted with bullying may feel they are not doing their job well and handle this perceived failure by denying that their students are being victimized (Bradley, 1978). In addition, future studies may investigate why teachers in the pilot study also gave victim nominations to students who according to their self-reports had not been victimized.

It is interesting that after the interviews some participants were curious about the agreement between their perceptions of the victims in their classroom and the reports of the students. This indicates that the teachers were not fully sure about their own answers. Perhaps this curiosity could serve as a starting point for discussing the situation in the classroom with teachers. A coach could discuss teacher's victim nominations with the teacher and compare these with students' reports.

Focusing on the victimization of individual students rather than on the general prevalence of victimization in the classroom allows future studies to investigate both teacher and student characteristics that are possibly associated with the ability to recognize victimized students. For instance, the recognition of victimized students may depend on the form and frequency of the victimization. Moreover future studies could investigate whether teachers who provided more complete definitions of bullying and used more effective strategies to find out about bullying were more likely to recognize victimized students. Finally, we suggest that follow-up studies

should not only investigate whether teachers recognize victimized students but also whether they know who are the bullies of these students.

Conclusion

Teachers in this pilot study gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom, suggesting that they may not be fully prepared to tackle bullying. Given the potential damage of bullying, we argue that it is important that this study is followed-up on and we provided some starting points for future research.

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