



## Student victimization by teachers in Taiwan: Prevalence and associations

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This paper reports on the prevalence of student victimization by teachers in junior high schools in a Chinese cultural context (Taiwan) and examines how student demographic variables (gender, grade level, and family socioeconomic status) and school social experiences (student–teacher relationships and involvement with at-risk peers) are associated with such victimization.

**Methods:** Data were obtained from a large-scale random sample of 1,376 junior-high students (grades 7–9) in the city of Taichung, Taiwan. Students were given an anonymous structured questionnaire, including items regarding basic demographics and school social experiences.

**Results:** Overall, 26.9% of students reported having been maltreated by teachers at least 1 time in the previous semester. Hitting, beating, or slapping was the most common maltreatment, and the most vulnerable students were boys and senior students. Students who perceived that student–teacher relationships were poor, and those who were involved with at-risk peers, were more likely to report victimization.

**Conclusion:** Although there are clear guidelines and regulations prohibiting teacher aggression against students, Taiwanese students are still exposed to high levels of maltreatment. The findings provide empirical evidence to support school social workers and policymakers in taking immediate action to educate politicians, the general public, and the media about the severity of student victimization by teachers as well as to build up mechanisms to supervise the government's enforcement of regulation. These findings clearly imply that promoting positive social experiences for students is crucial for successful intervention.

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### Introduction

To date, research on issues surrounding school violence has mainly focused on student victimization by peers (e.g., Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). In contrast, studies on student victimization by teachers are relatively limited, and most of these studies have been conducted in non-Asian countries with a major focus on corporal punishment (Chianu, 2000; Dupper & Dingus, 2008; Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998). Only a few research studies have reported on emotional and sexual maltreatment by teachers during school hours (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Delfabbro et al., 2006; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Whitted & Dupper, 2008; Zeira, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2002). All of these previous studies consistently show a high prevalence of different types of student maltreatment by teachers.

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Still, a handful of published studies have implied that student victimization by educators in educational settings may be widespread in Asian schools (Brown, 2009; Kim et al., 2000). For example, one report indicated that 51.1% of surveyed Chinese students and 62.0% of Korean students had experienced corporal punishment from teachers (Kim et al., 2000). However, these studies were conducted using small convenience samples and asked only 1 or 2 questions about corporal punishment (Kim et al., 2000). As a result, existing research in Asian cultures provides limited knowledge on this topic.

It is important to explore the issue of student victimization by teachers in an Asian cultural context, such as Taiwan, since teachers traditionally are highly revered in Confucian societies (Fwu & Wang, 2002). Even now, teachers in Taiwan enjoy relatively higher prestige than their counterparts in other countries (Fwu & Wang, 2002). They are seen as role models promoting student well-being as well as providing a safe environment for students' social, psychological, and academic development (Schoenhals, 1994). Once students experience teacher maltreatment, they are more likely to suffer serious mental health problems and poor quality of life (e.g., Chen & Wei, 2011). However, few school violence intervention programs are designed to prevent from maltreatment by teachers (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi & Rosemond, 2005; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

Furthermore, although the Ministry of Education has a policy against corporal punishment in schools in Taiwan (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2006), most teachers, parents, and even students still believe that the infliction of physical or psychological pain can improve student behavior and academic performance (Kim et al., 2000; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003; Tang, 2006). This raises the question of how frequently Taiwanese students experience different forms of victimization by teachers. In addition, previous studies reported that students in Taiwan spend over one-third of their day in school, where they intensively interact with their teachers and peers (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2006). However, there is a lack of studies on how student school social experiences are associated with student victimization by teachers, whether in Taiwan or in other countries (Chen & Wei, 2011; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

In order to expand our understanding of school violence, the present study uses a large-scale dataset from Taiwan to explore comprehensively, from the student perspective, how students are victimized by their teachers in an Asian cultural context. The main goals of this study are to (a) describe the prevalence of specific forms of student victimization by school teachers, and (b) to examine how student demographic variables (i.e., gender, grade level, and family socioeconomic status) and school social experiences relate to student victimization by teachers. The information in this study should be valuable for developing sound programs aimed at preventing and managing student victimization by teachers.

The term "student victimization by teachers" in this study refers to student reports of any teacher behavior intended to harm or maltreat students while in school (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Three types of victimization are identified in the literature: physical, emotional, and sexual (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Zeira et al., 2002), and this study covers all three types.

#### *Associations of student maltreatment by teachers*

**Gender.** International literature consistently reports that male students are more likely to be physically punished (Brown, 2009; Delfabbro et al., 2006; Youssef et al., 1998). Prior studies also indicate that boys are more likely to report being emotionally, physically, and sexually maltreated by staff members in schools (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Zeira et al., 2002). Thus, the present study hypothesizes that male students are more likely than female ones to experience emotional, physical, and sexual maltreatment by teachers in Taiwan.

**Grade level.** Some theories and studies have suggested that younger students are much more vulnerable to authority than are older students, and therefore junior children are more likely to be maltreated by educators (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Youssef et al., 1998). However, Hyman and McDowell (1979) argue that student victimization by educators may increase with grade level because most maltreatment cases are perpetrated by male teachers against male students, and the proportion of male teachers is smaller when students are younger. Some other empirical studies even suggest that relationships between grade level (or age) and the prevalence of maltreatment are weak (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002) or even non-significant (Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

There is a lack of empirical evidence showing how grade level relates to prevalence of student maltreatment by teachers in Taiwan. However, literature from Chinese societies indicates that Chinese adults tend to use aggressive punishment as a disciplinary strategy to control younger children's unacceptable behavior and that younger children are more vulnerable to maltreatment by adults (Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon & Conger, 2000; Tang, 2006). Accordingly, the present study hypothesizes that the prevalence of student maltreatment by teachers decreases in Taiwanese junior high schools as grade level increases.

**Family socio-economic status (family SES).** Theoretically, students from poor families are more likely to experience victimization since their relatively fewer family resources and power may be perceived by teachers as easier targets of violence (Chen & Wei, 2011; Davidson & Demaray, 2007; McFarlane, Bellissimo, & Norman, 1995). Empirical studies from western and Middle Eastern contexts also support the association between SES and victimization by teachers (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

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