How teachers respond to school bullying: An examination of self-reported intervention strategy use, moderator effects, and concurrent use of multiple strategies

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' use of intervention strategies in a hypothetical bullying case is examined.
- Strategies are mainly authority-based, followed by non-punitive work with bullies.
- Teachers are less likely to work with victims or ignore the incident.
- Strategy use is moderated by teachers' gender and teaching experience.
- Implications for bullying prevention programs and teacher education are discussed.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' ($N = 625$; 74% female) use of intervention strategies was examined in a hypothetical bullying episode. Self-reported strategies were best described by a five-factor structure. Teachers preferred authority-based interventions, followed by non-punitive work with bullies and involvement of other adults. They were less likely to work with victims or ignore the incident. About 60% of teachers would apply authority-based interventions toward bullies without working with victims at the same time, while 3% would work with victims without using authority-based interventions toward bullies. Strategy use was moderated by teachers' gender and teaching experience. Implications for bullying prevention and teacher education are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive problem in schools worldwide and is therefore a research topic of international interest. Previous research has shown that systematic whole-school approaches—in which teachers' intervention strategies play a major role—are crucial for bullying prevention (Ahtola, Haataja, Kärnä, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2012; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012; Veenstra,

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Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). Teachers can potentially apply several strategies when responding to a bullying incident (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Yoon, Bauman, Choi, & Hutchinson, 2011). The present research examines self-reported strategy use of teachers in Austria and Germany when being confronted with a hypothetical bullying incident.

A huge body of research shows that bullying—a subcategory of aggressive behavior which is characterized by hostile intent, imbalance of power and repetition (e.g., Olweus, 1993; Roland, 1989; Smith & Sharp, 1994)—has many negative consequences. Both bullies and victims exhibit lower levels of health and well-being, and report higher levels of depression (Isaacs, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007), anxiety (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000), suicidality (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Klomek et al., 2007) and psychosomatic symptoms (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000). Furthermore, both bullies and victims show more school truancy, feel more unsafe at schools (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000) and have lower academic achievements compared with non-involved youth (Glew et al., 2005; Juvonen et al., 2000; Nansel et al., 2001). Moreover, the negative effects of bullying have been shown to extend to adulthood (Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Isaacs et al. 2008).

Thus, bullying has been identified as a major public health problem (Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010) and a threat for the educational system and economy (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008). Therefore, bullying prevention and anti-bullying intervention in schools are of high importance.

Taking a socio-ecological perspective (Espelage & Swearer, 2004), bullying incidents unfold in social contexts which are not only constituted by single individuals such as the bully or the victim (Yoon, 2004), but also by the interaction of peers (e.g., bystanders, reinforcers, defenders; Salmivalli, 2010) and adults (e.g., teachers, school administrators, counselors; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). It is therefore important, that anti-bullying efforts target the whole system, aiming for a supportive and respectful school climate where students can feel safe and secure. This is best done by so-called whole-school approaches where school educators and students are committed to creating a bullying-resistant climate (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014).

When bullying happens in schools, immediate interventions carried out by peers or school educators can stop bullying successfully (Hawkins et al., 2001; Veenstra et al., 2014). Peers are usually present during bullying episodes. However they rarely intervene (Berkowitz, 2014; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000), but rather reinforce bullying by watching the incident or assisting the bully (Craig et al., 2000; O'Connel, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). To change these negative peer dynamics, it is important for educators to intervene. Teachers spend the most time with students and thus have a key role in intervening in ongoing bullying episodes (Grumm & Hein, 2012). In many countries, including Austria and Germany, laws even impose a legal duty of care on teachers to ensure the safety and well-being of their students. Thus, teachers have both a professional and moral obligation to intervene in bullying episodes (Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011). Consequently, adequate responses by them are considered of high importance in many whole-school intervention and prevention programs (e.g., Ahtola et al., 2012; Olweus, 1993; Strohmeier, Hofmann, Schiller, Stefanek, & Spiel, 2012).

1.1. Teachers' intervention strategies

Teachers can respond in very different ways when being confronted with bullying (Bauman et al., 2008). They may, for example, choose to ignore the bullying incident (e.g., Bauman & Del Rio, 2006), which is likely to be interpreted as implicit approval by the bullies and increases the frequency and intensity of the bullying behavior (Yoon, 2004).

Teachers might employ an authority-based approach, which can be described as a control-oriented strategy (Brophy & McCaslin, 1992; Olweus, 1993; Roland & Vaaland, 2006). Teachers applying this strategy mainly use their personal authority to establish firm limits with verbal reprimands, and if unsuccessful, other disciplinary means including all kinds of sanctions. The use of authority-based interventions is considered important in many prevention programs (Olweus, 1993; Roland & Vaaland, 2006), and there is an ongoing debate in which situations this approach is justifiable (Bauman et al., 2008) and effective (Garandeau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2014). While clear verbal reprimands were found to decrease bullying incidents when used in combination with other non-punitive interventions (i.e., authoritative style; Gregory et al., 2010), solely authority-based strategies are harmful as they have been shown to achieve only short-term behavioral change regarding the bullies' behavior (Rigby & Bauman, 2010), lead to more subtle and indirect (but not less aggressive) forms of bullying which are much harder to recognize and control (Byers et al., 2011), and in the long run increase the school's overall violence levels (Berkowitz, 2014). Even in very severe cases of bullying and school violence, it has been shown that sanctions such as temporarily removing the bully from the class or school were not effective in stopping bullying incidents in the long run (Ayers, Wagaman, Geiger, Bermudez-Parsai, & Hedberg, 2012).

Teachers might also adopt a non-punitive approach (e.g., restorative justice approach; Morrison, 2007). Such approaches aim to address the bullies' motives for their behavior, increase their empathy and responsibility, give them insights in the harm that has resulted from their wrong-doing, and help them to find non-aggressive behavioral strategies.

Teachers might also work with victims to strengthen and support their well-being by increasing their assertiveness (e.g., Field, 2003). Paying appropriate attention to the victims is very important because they are often overlooked by adults and left alone by their peers (Duy, 2013; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Unless adults or peers intervene, victims are not likely to escape the abusive relationship by themselves because of the power-imbalance. Usually victims do nothing and therefore develop a sense of helplessness over time (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007).

Another possibility for teachers is to handle the bullying incident as a team (e.g., Koivisto, 2004). Asking colleague teachers for support or consulting with counselors or school administrators can help them getting new perspectives and insights. Involving parents or guardians may be helpful to successfully reducing bullying by tapping into another mesosystem that is of primary importance for the children (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

Previous research revealed that balanced and flexible interventions support student–teacher relationships and a positive school climate (Way, 2011). Having a large repertoire of different strategy types is therefore important for teachers to be able to intervene in a flexible and adaptive way. Furthermore, applying multiple strategies at the same time may be more likely to be successful than using only one strategy. However, thus far, the combined use of different strategies by teachers has not been systematically investigated.

1.2. Potential moderator variables of strategy use

Situational and individual teacher characteristics have been identified as potential moderator variables for teachers' strategy use. Situational variables include, for example, the degree of