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Tackling bullying: Victimized by peers as a pupil, an effective intervener as a teacher?

Teemu H.J. Kokko [a,1], Maili Pörhölä [b,*]

[a] University of Joensuu, Department of Finnish Language and Cultural Studies, P.O.Box 111, FI-80101 Joensuu, Finland
[b] University of Jyväskylä, Department of Communication, P.O.Box 35, FI-40014 Jyväskylä, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on student teachers as a prospective special resource in the prevention of school bullying in the course of their future professional careers. Special attention is paid to the influence the respondents' own childhood experiences of bullying may have in this regard. To investigate this question, we assessed the respondents' estimations of the level of empathy they felt towards the victims of bullying, the degree of effort they made to prevent bullying, and their ability to identify it. Further, an attempt to assess the long-term consequences of bullying was made, using two different communicative indices: the willingness to communicate and self-perceived communication competence. It is suggested that teachers' own experiences of victimization may enhance their ability to communicate effectively when fighting against bullying at school.

1. Introduction

Bullying, victimization, peer abuse, and mobbing are some examples of the terms used to describe the negative, aggressive, and unjust behaviour of an individual or a group, directed at a peer or peers at school. Researchers have used these terms to refer to a systematic, intentional, and long-lasting process of subjection, in which the participants are not equally matched (e.g., Olweus, 1993a, 2003; Rigby, 1996; Smith & Sharp, 1994). The purpose of this aggressive behaviour and harmful communication is to hurt, subjugate, or humiliate the victim. (For a more precise analysis of these concepts, see, e.g., Pörhölä, Karhunen, & Rainivaara, 2006.)

Although bullying may take the form of physical attacks on the victim, it is most often realized as verbal aggression and hurtful messages expressed in a variety of communication situations. The most typical forms of bullying among schoolchildren include communication behaviour such as name-calling, making fun of someone, threats, blackmail, the spreading of nasty rumours, and exclusion from the group (Olweus, 1993a; Sharp & Smith, 1991). As demonstrated by Karhunen and Pörhölä (2007), bullying can also contain implicit hurtful messages and insults, the meaning of which can only really be understood by the members of a particular group of schoolchildren. In addition, hurtful communication behaviours typically appear in association with nonverbal messages such as making faces and mean gestures; giving nasty looks; laughing; or using a vocally threatening, mocking, ironic, or oversweet style. According to Karhunen & Pörhölä, these messages take very little time to convey; and so it is often very hard for an outsider to notice them, and even harder, to interpret them.

In addition to hurtful messages directly addressed to the victim, bullying often consists of communication which concerns the victim, and harms him or her, even though he or she may be totally unaware that this communication is taking place. This kind of *indirect* or *relational* bullying refers to the harm inflicted through purposeful manipulation of or damage to the peer relationships of the target individual. This can be carried out, for example, by spreading nasty rumours, withholding friendship, or excluding the target from the peer group (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

The aggressive and abusive communication behaviour described above is unfortunately very common among schoolchildren. In studies conducted in several countries, the number of victims of repeated bullying in school has most typically varied from 10 to 15 percent; a slightly smaller percentage of students usually report having frequently acted as a bully (see, e.g., Craig &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 14 260 1523; fax: +358 14 260 1511.
E-mail address: maili.porhola@jyu.fi (M. Pörhölä).
[1] Present address: The North Karelia Adult Education Centre, P.O.Box 199, FI-80101 Joensuu, Finland.

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Harel, 2004; Smith et al., 1999). The highest incidence of bullying occurs in grades 5–9, corresponding approximately to ages 11–15 (Craig & Harel, 2004; Solberg & Olweus, 2003).

Hence, bullying at school poses a serious and globally occurring problem. This problem requires the development of effective prevention and interventions strategies by the school personnel. In order to be able to effectively tackle school bullying, the best human resources available at school ought to be identified and recruited for this purpose.

1.1. Tackling bullying at school

It is evident that tackling bullying requires special efforts to be made; and further, requires the teaching and administrative staff to possess certain specific qualities. First, it requires the sensitivity to be able to identify bullying. This may be difficult, particularly in cases of relational bullying, and when the bullying takes the forms of implicit and indirect hurting of the target. In order to identify this kind of bullying, the school personnel should consciously pay attention to the group structuring processes among schoolchildren, and try to identify individuals who have been left out of peer groups, and others who have strong influence inside these groups.

Second, the adults at school should be able to understand the feelings and subjective experience of the victims, and have a strong personal commitment to help them and to prevent bullying. Previous studies have shown that successful outcomes can be reached in anti-bullying interventions only if the school personnel are highly committed to preventing and stopping bullying (Pepler, Smith, & Rigby, 2004; Salmivalli, 2003).

Third, the adults in key positions at school should be willing to intervene in cases of bullying by discussing them with the children and adolescents involved, and with other members of the staff, as well as with the children's parents. The need for this kind of talking with all the parties involved in the problem has been emphasized in literature focusing on the development of anti-bullying programs (e.g., Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994; Salmivalli, 2003). Finally, intervention in cases of bullying requires sufficient communication competence, to enable the person making the intervention to approach the different parties in a discrete, but effective manner.

Although school personnel have both a legal and an educational obligation to prevent and intervene in school bullying as soon as it occurs, it seems that teachers may not have sufficient knowledge, or the requisite skills to deal with this problem. Since schoolchildren have a tendency to be silent about the bullying they have been subjected to or witnessed (e.g., Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Whitney & Smith, 1993), the identification of bullying becomes the first challenge for teachers. Previous studies suggest that identifying bullying among schoolchildren is difficult for teachers, and that they are not adequately aware of the extent of the problem (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001); or of the identity of bullies (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999).

The relational forms of bullying (e.g., spreading rumours, stealing friends, excluding someone from the peer group), in particular, seem to be more difficult for teachers to identify than the direct verbal (e.g., calling names, mocking, threatening) and physical forms (e.g., hitting, kicking, stealing or destroying the victim's property) (Craig & Pepler, 1997). Previous studies suggest that teachers also underestimate the severity of verbal and relational bullying, and therefore tend to intervene in these kinds of bullying incidents much less that they intervene in physical bullying (e.g., Xie, Swift, B. D. Cairns, & R. B. Cairns, 2002). Yoon and Kerber (2003) found that teachers viewed the social exclusion of a student less seriously, felt less empathy towards its victims, and were less likely to intervene in this kind of bullying, as compared to physical and verbal bullying. As noted by Bauman and Del Rio (2006), undergraduate students in a teacher education program had similar attitudes, reporting least empathy for the victims of relational bullying, and lowest likelihood of intervening in relational bullying incidents.

The second challenge for teachers' expertise is knowing how to intervene effectively in bullying incidents. In addition to the problems of identification, teachers may lack the appropriate means to solve the bullying problems as they appear. This could be seen, for example, in a Canadian study in which a marked discrepancy was observed between teachers' and students' reports during an anti-bullying intervention. While the majority of teachers reported having talked to both bullies and victims, only half of the bullies and victims indicated that they had spoken about the bullying with a teacher; and the proportion of students reporting that teachers "sometimes or always intervened in bullying" was only around fifty percent (Pepler et al., 1994). Correspondingly, for solving bullying problems, student teachers in a teacher education program attending the study of Bauman and Del Rio (2006) suggested discussions with children, the content of which seemed quite ineffective and inappropriate for the purpose.

In the previous studies described above, teachers and student teachers have been examined as a homogenous group, without acknowledging that there might be some groups of individuals who are more committed and skilled than others in identifying bullying and in solving bullying problems. A special resource which could be exploited in the fight against school bullying might be those teachers and other adults at school who have had their own experience of having been victimized at school in their youth. Because of their own personal experience of victimization, these adults might be supposed to be particularly sensitive in making observations of students' interpersonal and group relationships, and would more likely be able to identify students at risk of becoming bullied or isolated from student groups, and also notice other students who form an actual or potential threat for these at-risk-students. As they might also be able to understand the suffering of the victims, and feel empathy for them, these individuals could be highly committed to preventing bullying and intervening in the bullying incidents.

However, as we will show in the next section, victimization by peers at school can have serious and long-term consequences for the victim's psychosocial well-being; consequences, some of which have not yet even been identified. If some members of the school staff still suffer from the negative consequences of their own victimization, it could prevent them from acting as effectively as they otherwise might do when interfering in incidents of bullying. In the following section, we provide a short review of the studies focusing on the consequences of victimization at school, and discuss the possible impact of this on the communication behaviour of the victims in their later lives. The aim of this discussion is to evaluate the possible limitations former victims might have as agents in the fight against school bullying.

1.2. Consequences of school bullying

For the victim, bullying is a traumatic experience which markedly reduces the quality of life during the victim's schooldays. Previous research has suggested some *immediate consequences* of bullying for the victim's psychosocial well-being. These include low self-worth, feelings of loneliness (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000), social anxiety (Graham & Juvonen, 1998), and lowered self-esteem and depression (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Kaltiala-Heino, M. Rimpelä, Rantanen, & A. Rimpelä, 2000).