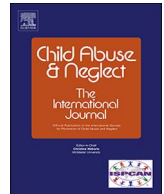




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Research article

Resilience following emotional abuse by teachers: Insights from a cross-sectional study with Greek students

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ABSTRACT

An integrative socio-ecological model was developed to investigate the impact of emotional abuse by teachers on children's psychological functioning and test the role of social support and self-confidence as protective factors associated with resilience. Emotional abuse by teachers, social support from family, peers, school and a significant adult from the community, self-confidence and psychological functioning were assessed in a sample of young Greek school students aged 9–12 years ($n = 223$, mean age = 10.8, $SD = 0.885$). Results revealed that exposure to emotional abuse by teachers predicted behavioural problems in school students suggesting a negative effect of these experiences on psychological functioning. The bootstrapped mediation model showed that the impact of emotional abuse by teachers on psychological functioning was significantly diminished through the influence of social support and self-confidence. Also, social support exerted a strong positive impact on self-confidence. This is the first study to show that individual and environmental factors using a socio-ecological model of resilience influence the adverse outcomes of this form of abuse in school aged children. These findings suggest that emotional abuse by teachers should be considered as a potential source of behavioural problems and adjustment in elementary students. Social support through its strong effect on self-confidence is an important protective factor of resilience against emotional abuse by teachers.

1. Introduction

1.1. Emotional abuse by teachers

Emotional abuse refers to a relationship between a child and a caregiver, which is characterized by a consistent pattern of harmful interactions for the child without including acts of physical or sexual abuse (Glaser, 2002). Children are likely to experience emotional abuse in family and other social contexts, such as in their school. While, emotional abuse by caregivers in family settings and peer-to-peer emotional abuse in schools have been extensively investigated, emotional abuse by teachers has not been adequately addressed (Jackson, Browne, & Joseph, 2016; Whitted & Dupper, 2008). Even though there are studies that documented this phenomenon (e.g. Lee, 2015) and a few studies that examined its effects (e.g. Sava, 2002), there is no evidence on factors that may protect children experiencing emotional abuse by teachers. Existing literature suggests that emotional abuse by teachers has been applied to a range of verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Aluede, 2004), however, a variety of terms have been used to describe the phenomenon and the literature lacks a comprehensive definition. Emotional abuse by teachers can be defined as a pattern of verbal

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and non-verbal behaviours that do not include any type of physical contact, between a student and a teacher, which results in emotional, social, cognitive and somatic consequences for the student's functioning and adjustment. Verbal abuse may include use of sarcasm, ridicule or denigrating statements, yelling, name-calling, insulting, mocking a student's appearance or disabilities and making negative comments about a child's family. Non-verbal abuse may include neglect such as ignoring the student and behaviours such as assigning homework to impose discipline and using punishment for not responding correctly to an exercise/question (McEachern, Aluede, & Kenny, 2008).

A number of studies from different countries examined rates of reported emotional abuse incidents by teachers within the school setting. For example, an early nationwide study in Israel showed 29% of elementary students attending grades 4–6 reported the experience of at least one type of emotional abuse (Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002). Using a similar study design Theoklitou, Kabitsis, and Kabitsi (2012) found that almost 53% and 33% of elementary school students indicated that have been the victims of neglect and emotional abuse by teachers respectively (Theoklitou et al., 2012). In a recent school based study 18% of the participants reported at least one experience of emotional abuse by teachers, who insulted, mocked or referred to them using humiliating labels such as loser, fool or idiot during the previous academic year (Lee, 2015). These rates suggest that child emotional abuse by adults is in fact a phenomenon that exists not only within the family context, but in school settings as well.

Emotional abuse by teachers may have detrimental outcomes on children's well-being similar to emotional abuse that occurs in family. Research suggests that emotional abuse by teachers is associated with emotional and behavioural problems (Hyman & Perone, 1998; McEachern et al., 2008) and that it may reduce children's self-worth and confidence (Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005). Despite facing challenges in their lives many children cope and adjust, thus showing resilience (Masten, 2014). Resilience has been conceptualized as a dynamic process of interactions of protective factors that promote adaptation (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). A number of studies showed that self-confidence and social support promoted resilience in children who experienced emotional abuse in their family (Doyle, Timms, & Sheehan, 2010; Gabalda, Broth, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2009; Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006). In a similar vein with emotional abuse by parents or other caregivers, social support and self-confidence may also promote resilience in cases of emotional abuse by teachers. In this context, the present study aims to examine the direct and indirect relationships between social support, self-confidence and psychological functioning in students reporting emotional abuse by teachers.

1.2. Effects of emotional abuse by teachers

Teacher-student relationships have been associated with students' emotional, behavioural and cognitive outcomes (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012), thus being central to students' schooling experience (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). While positive teacher-student relationships contribute to students' well-being, negative aspects of these relationships may have unfavourable outcomes on their socio-emotional adjustment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Skalicka, Stenseng, & Wichstrom, 2015). Perceiving the school environment as secure and safe is important and teachers as key elements of this environment may either foster a sense of security or create feelings of uncertainty in their students (Whitted & Dupper, 2008). According to McEvoy (2005), when the educator induces fear instead of respect, then they become a person that students constantly try to avoid or escape from. Consequently, students find themselves trapped into an environment with no way out, such as an office or a classroom by an individual placed in a position of power.

Intimidating, threatening, isolating or/and humiliating are some teachers' behaviours that inflict emotional abuse on students. Such behaviours not only undermine the trust that should encompass student-teacher relationships, but also degrade students' sense of connection with their school (McEachern et al., 2008). Hyman and Perone (1998) noted that students who experienced abuse by teachers reported feelings of isolation and alienation towards their school. Poor academic performance, disengagement from social activities and even drop-out are some of the negative consequences encountered by students that feel disconnected from their academic environment (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). Thus, emotional abuse by teachers may contribute to students' social withdrawal and loss of connection with their school, which in turn may result in school denial or even drop-out (Krugman & Krugman, 1984; McEachern et al., 2008).

Emotional abuse by teachers has been linked to a range of negative effects on children's physical and psychological well-being. Indeed, the early experimental study of Krugman and Krugman (1984) showed the negative impact of a single teacher's abusive behavior on students' physical and psychological health status. Sava (2002) found that emotional abuse by teachers was related to increased emotional and somatic symptoms in students. In another study, emotional abuse by teachers was identified as one of the most significant sources of school stress for students (Piekarska, 2000). The longitudinal studies of Brendgen and colleagues provided evidence of the predictive links of childhood exposure to emotional abuse by teachers on students' functioning in later developmental stages. In particular, following student cohorts from early childhood through adulthood, the authors showed that experiences of verbal emotional abuse had negative consequences such as behavior problems and academic difficulties on students' adjustment in early adolescence (Brendgen, Wanner, & Vitaro, 2006) and emerging adulthood (Brendgen, Wanner, Vitaro, Bukowski, & Tremblay, 2007). Together these studies show that the outcomes of emotional abuse by teachers on children's well-being may be as debilitating as the outcomes linked to emotional abuse by parents or other caregivers (Iwaniec et al., 2006).

1.3. The mediating role of resilience

Resilience refers to the dynamic process of positive adaptation and coping within a context of risk and stressful life events. Factors associated with resilience can influence the negative consequences of adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). The list of protective factors identified in the resilience literature is extensive, while it has been suggested that these factors are differentiated according to the

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