



Research article

Prevalence and predictors of self-reported student maltreatment by teachers in South Korea



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ABSTRACT

This study first investigated the prevalence of emotional and physical maltreatment by teachers in South Korea and then identified factors that predict student maltreatment by teachers. Specific areas of interest were the associations between student demographic characteristics (gender and grade level), family (economic status), and school experience (academic performance and student–teacher relationships) and how these characteristics were related to student maltreatment. Data were obtained by questionnaire from a random sample of 1,777 students in middle schools in Seoul, the largest metropolitan area, and its surrounding province, Gyeonggi-Do. Questionnaires were completed during school time. All information was collected anonymously. Of those surveyed, 18.2% reported emotional maltreatment by teachers and 24.3% physical maltreatment. Overall, 30.7% reported being either emotionally or physically mistreated by teachers at least once in the previous year. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that gender, family economic status, academic performance, and student–teacher relationships were predictors of student maltreatment by teachers. The results have practical and policy implications for the design of programs that will result in altering abusive teacher classroom behavior.

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Most studies on school violence have focused on victimization of students by other students (Chen & Wei, 2011a). There have been relatively few studies on student victimization by teachers (Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Hyman & Perone, 1998), although numerous types of student maltreatment by educators have been identified in educational settings worldwide (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Chen & Wei, 2011a; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Theoklitou, Kabitsis, & Kabitsi, 2011). Korea has a long history of Confucian ideology (Kim & Emery, 2003) in which teachers are revered as the equals of king and father (Choi, 2013; Park & Lee, 2010). The Korean expression “Don’t even tread on the shadow of your teacher,” reflects the level of respect given teachers (Park, 2013). Another phrase, “holding a rod,” refers to a teacher and reflects that a teacher’s administration of corporal punishment has historically been considered a reasonable means to curb unacceptable behavior (Chang, Rhee, & Weaver, 2006). As to the prevalence of corporal punishment in Korean schools, in 1998 Kim et al. (2000), using survey data obtained from elementary students in Korea and China, found that 62% of Korean elementary students had experienced mild-to-severe forms of corporal punishment by teachers in the prior year as had 51.1% of Chinese elementary students. They defined corporal punishment as being pushed, shoved, slapped, kicked, hit, beaten, or attacked with dangerous objects. Despite the prevalence of corporal punishment, in 1991, the government of South Korea ratified the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (Yang, 2009), which in articles 19 and 28 states that “Parties shall take all appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence” and that “Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child’s human dignity” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1990). Not until 20 years later, in March 2011, in response to comments by child advocates that the South Korean government finally revised the country’s Elementary and Secondary Educational Enforcement Ordinance to ban corporal punishment

that inflicts physical pain by use of any instrument or the body when disciplining students (Korean Ministry of Education, 2011). However, a large proportion of South Korean teachers and parents, regardless of region, continued to support the concept that infliction of physical and psychological pain with a pedagogic purpose was necessary (Cho, Kim, & Pyo, 2012; Korean Educational Development Institute, 2011). This raised the question of the extent to which students experienced different forms of victimization by teachers.

Since the publication of the study by Kim et al. (2000) that primarily focused on corporal punishment of elementary school students, no subsequent studies have been done in South Korea to assess teacher maltreatment of older students. Thus, this study was undertaken to investigate both physical and emotional maltreatment by teachers of middle school students.

Literature on student maltreatment by teachers in general describes emotional maltreatment as name calling, mocking a student's physical appearance or intellectual abilities, humiliating or cursing the student, and similar demeaning behavior (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Chen & Wei, 2011a). As regard to physical maltreatment, the debate about whether corporal punishment is maltreatment has continued in the literature (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002). Furthermore, there has been no consensus on where to draw the line between corporal punishment and physical maltreatment in South Korea (Yang, 2009). Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize corporal punishment as a continuum of maltreatment rather than to place it in a different category (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008). Recently, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child determined that corporal punishment in which physical force is inflicted and intended to harm is a form of maltreatment as described in General Comment No. 13 on The Rights of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence (United Nations, 2011). Thus, in the current study, physical maltreatment by a teacher refers to any of a teacher's behaviors that involve physical force and are intended to harm the student regardless of the degree of physical force and whether or not the intent was to cause physical injury.

Some studies (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005) reported a positive relationship between corporal punishment and child adjustment problems when children perceived punishment as "normative." In such cultures, there was a weaker association between corporal punishment and child adjustment problems. However, these studies examined child maltreatment by parents, not by teachers. Recently, in a study of how student maltreatment by teachers affects student psychological well-being, Chen and Wei (2011b), who studied a sample of Taiwanese junior high school students, found no significant association between student maltreatment by teachers and depression or self-esteem. However, their findings differ from much empirical evidence in both Eastern and Western cultures that suggests that student maltreatment by teachers is associated with student psychological, behavioral and academic problems and with less likelihood of completing school (Ali, AShraah, & Al-Swalha, 2013; Baker-Henningham, Meeks Gardner, Chang, & Walker, 2009; Brendgen, Wanner, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007; Delfabbro et al., 2006; Kim, 2000; Khoury-Kassabri, 2009; Moon & Hwang, 2006). Moreover, in South Korea teachers are inconsistent in their punishment. Kim (1999) looked at the impartiality (fairness) of punishment and reported that 46% of students and 42% of teachers in Korea agreed that the method of punishment changed depending on the student. Just 26% of students and 32% of teachers thought that punishment was administered fairly. These results strongly indicate that punishment methods are not consistently based on a student's behavior and are related to the teacher's subjective judgment of an individual. Thus, despite the teachers' beliefs that they should treat students equally, their actions reflect their prejudices toward certain students and imply that some students are more vulnerable to maltreatment by teachers. However, little is known about the types of students most vulnerable to maltreatment. Therefore, empirical research was needed to investigate the types of students more vulnerable to teacher maltreatment within the South Korean educational setting.

Previous studies of student maltreatment by teachers focused on student demographics and family characteristics (e.g., Theoklitou et al., 2011). Khoury-Kassabri (2006) proposed the importance of an ecological perspective when dealing with student maltreatment by teachers. He argued that student maltreatment by teachers could be best understood within the social and school context in which the students lived. However, only a handful of studies have examined school experiences and student maltreatment by teachers (Chen & Wei, 2011a; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006). Because South Korean students spend one-third of each day in school and closely interact with their teachers for 190 school days each year (Kim, 1999; OECD, 2014), teachers are strong influences in their lives. This study examined student social experiences and focused on student-teacher relationships and student maltreatment by teachers.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence of emotional and physical maltreatment of middle school students by teachers in South Korea and to identify factors associated with student maltreatment by teachers. Based on the ecological perspective, this study explored the associations between student demographic characteristics, their families, and school experiences relevant to student maltreatment by teachers. The ultimate goal was to obtain data that would be sufficient for proposing practical and policy changes to prevent student maltreatment by teachers within the South Korean educational system.

Factors Associated with Student Maltreatment by Teachers

Gender

Previous studies consistently show that male students are subject to more physical punishment or emotional maltreatment by educational staff or teachers in the East and West than are female students (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Chen & Wei,

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