The impact of victims' responses on teacher reactions to bullying

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Victims' behavioral and emotional responses to bullying affected teacher reactions.
- Teachers attributed the most blame to angry victims.
- Bullies of angry and confident victims attracted less blame.
- Incidents involving confident or angry victims were perceived less negatively.
- Teachers were least likely to intervene in incidents involving confident victims.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how victims' responses to bullying affect teachers' attitudes and reactions. Australian teachers ($N = 289$) completed online questionnaires about hypothetical videotaped bullying scenarios portraying four different victim responses (angry, sad, confident, ignoring). Teachers attributed the most blame to angry victims, while bullies of angry and confident victims attracted less blame. Episodes involving confident and angry victims (compared to sad and ignoring victims) were perceived less negatively and evoked less teacher emotion. Furthermore, teachers reported fewer intentions to intervene in incidents involving confident victims. Implications for professional development programs for teachers and programs aimed at victims are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is characterized by repeated and intentionally aggressive behavior towards a less powerful individual (Olweus, 1994) and is a major cause for concern among school communities worldwide. Appropriate teacher intervention offers an important means of overcoming the power imbalance inherent within bullying relationships and represents a key avenue for reducing the systemic problem of bullying (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994). While teachers may recognize their critical responsibility to prevent and manage bullying within the school environment (Boulton, 1997), observational research and student reports suggest that teachers rarely intervene in bullying incidents (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Pepler et al., 1994). These findings are concerning given

that teachers' actual and perceived responses to bullying influence the behaviors of bullies, victims, and peer bystanders (Yoon, 2004; Yoon & Barton, 2008; Yoon & Bauman, 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). For example, low rates of teacher intervention tend to reinforce students' bullying behaviors (Craig, Pepler, et al., 2000) and inhibit help-seeking behaviors among victims (Oliver & Candappa, 2007), whereas victimization tends to decline with increased teacher intervention (Hektner & Swenson, 2011). By modelling appropriate responses to bullying, teachers can also encourage positive peer bystander interventions and can help establish a school climate that opposes bullying (Pepler et al., 1994; Yoon & Barton, 2008).

In order to train teachers in effective bullying prevention and management methods, teacher education programs have been implemented either as standalone interventions (e.g., Bully Busters; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; The GREAT Teacher Program; Orpinas & Horne, 2004) or within whole school anti-bullying programs (e.g., Cross et al., 2011). Whole school interventions have also emphasized the importance of establishing

anti-bullying policies, which include school rules against bullying and clear procedures outlining how school staff should address bullying incidents. In addition to these systemic approaches, whole school programs often incorporate individual-level interventions which seek to train victims in more effective ways of responding to bullying. The current study sought to inform the development of these different intervention components by examining the effect of victims' responses to bullying on teachers' attitudes and reactions. This line of research may offer insights into the role teachers can play in preventing and managing bullying while also elucidating barriers to effective teacher intervention.

Past research has indicated that teachers' attitudes and behaviors in bullying situations depend on a range of individual and situational factors (Yoon, Sulkowski, & Bauman, 2014). In general, pro-victim attitudes and intervention behaviors were more prevalent among teachers who were female (Boulton, 1997; Yoon, Bauman, Choi, & Hutchinson, 2011), who were more empathic (Craig, Henderson, Murphy, 2000), and who had higher self-efficacy for handling bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). In addition to exploring these characteristics, the current study examined moral disengagement (Obermann, 2011) and the frequency with which bullying is witnessed (Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015). These individual factors have been found to affect peer responses to bullying, but have yet to be studied in teacher samples.

Situational factors can also affect how teachers perceive and respond to school bullying. Research exploring the role of broad school factors has found that school level (e.g., primary or secondary; Bradshaw et al., 2007) and the presence of anti-bullying policies and procedures (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008) may influence some teacher outcomes, although these factors do not always have a significant effect (Bauman et al., 2008; Boulton, 1997; Yoon et al., 2011). Other studies highlight the influence of more proximal situational factors pertaining to specific bullying episodes. For example, bullying type has been found to play a role, with physical bullying being viewed as more serious and warranting of intervention compared to verbal bullying (Craig, Henderson, et al., 2000). There is also preliminary evidence suggesting that teachers' perceptions and reactions to bullying may vary depending on the gender of the students involved (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Yoon et al., 2014), with teachers rating physically aggressive acts committed by female students as more serious and warranting of punishment compared to acts perpetrated by male students (Rogowicz, Del Vecchio, Dwyer-Masin, & Hughes, 2014).

The victim's response to being bullied is a salient situational feature of bullying episodes. Despite speculation about its potential influence (Rogowicz et al., 2014), the impact of victims' responses on teacher reactions to bullying has yet to be adequately investigated. Preliminary evidence suggests that victims' responses may affect a range of teacher outcomes. One study investigating contextual attributes of indirect bullying situations found that victim distress had the greatest effect on teachers' decisions to intervene (Blain-Arcaro, Smith, Vaillancourt, & Rimas, 2012). Similarly, teachers have reported relying on victims' reactions to determine whether intervention is necessary in teasing interactions (Smith et al., 2010). Anecdotal evidence has also suggested that some teachers-in-training and school bullying experts considered how well victims defended themselves and the physical and psychological harm experienced by victims when determining the seriousness of bullying episodes (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative research has revealed that teachers may struggle to identify victims who respond confidently to bullying, due to assumptions that victims of bullying are socially inept, unassertive, and unable to stand up for themselves (Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Although

experimental evidence has not yet been gathered with teachers, one study has shown that victims' responses to bullying differentially influenced the attitudes and reactions of peer bystanders (Sokol et al., 2015). In this study, angry victims were assigned the most blame and bystanders reported the greatest intention to intervene when witnessing sad victim reactions. Incidents in which victims responded confidently were perceived to be the least serious and evoked the fewest intentions to intervene. Taken together, these findings suggest that victims' emotional displays and behavioral reactions may affect how teachers interpret and respond to bullying interactions.

The current study aimed to investigate the impact of victims' responses to bullying on teachers' attitudes and reactions and tested whether victim response effects found among peer bystanders extend to teacher bystanders. The potential effects of teacher gender, student gender, bullying type, and a range of individual and school factors were also investigated in order to clarify their role in determining teachers' reactions to bullying. The videotaped scenarios used to portray the four different victim responses (labelled as angry, sad, confident, ignoring) offered improved ecological validity compared to written vignettes (e.g., Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003) and allowed teachers to view victims' immediate emotional displays and behavioral reactions to negative peer interactions (Yoon et al., 2014). Based on findings from previous research examining the influence of victims' responses on peer bystanders (Sokol et al., 2015), it was predicted that the most blame would be attributed to angry victims, while their bullies would attract less blame. Teachers were also hypothesized to attribute less blame to bullies of confident victims, given that calm and assertive responses may interfere with students being identified as victims of bullying (Mishna et al., 2006, 2005). It was further predicted that episodes involving confident victims would be perceived as less serious and less distressing for victims and watching these incidents was expected to evoke less negative emotion and empathy (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that teachers would report fewer intentions to intervene in bullying incidents involving confident victims. Averaging across the different victim responses, teachers were predicted to rate physical bullying as more serious and likely to motivate intervention compared to verbal bullying (Craig, Henderson, et al., 2000).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The final sample comprised 289 teachers (M_{age} = 41.22 years, SD = 11.81, age range = 21–67 years), 20% of whom were male (n = 59). Similar gender ratios have been reported in past research (Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002) and this proportion is broadly consistent with Australian norms for the teaching profession (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). On average, teachers had 15.84 years of teaching experience (SD = 11.76, range = 1–46 years) and 81% of teachers worked full-time. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (90%) and 84% of teachers were born in Australia or New Zealand. The vast majority of participants completed their teacher training in Australia or New Zealand (96%) and 75% of teachers had received at least some anti-bullying training either during their teacher training or while working as a teacher. Sixty-three percent of the sample predominantly taught primary school (years K–6), while 37% predominantly taught secondary school (years 7–12). Ninety-two percent of teachers reported having experience teaching students in grades five through to eight which represented the target population in the current study. This student population was selected given the