Student-teacher relationships and bullying: The role of student social status

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ABSTRACT

Student–teacher relationships have been shown to influence bullying-related behaviors in students. This study considered the moderating role of students' social statuses in the classroom. The study sample included 435 students (48.7% females) taken from 18 Italian middle-school classrooms (i.e., sixth to eighth grade). A multigroup path analysis approach was employed to examine whether the effects of the student-teacher relationships on bullying-related behaviors differed among social statuses. The results showed that perceived conflict with the teacher was shown to have a significant positive effect on students' engagement in active bullying for students from all the statuses, except for neglected students. In particular, this effect was more relevant for rejected students. The results showed that social status and student-teacher relationships integrate and shed light on which roles are taken by young adolescents in school bullying, highlighting that it is important for the teachers to recognize these students.

A growing body of literature documents the effects of student–teacher relationships (STRs) on students' development (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The quality of student-teacher relationships has been recognized as having a positive influence on students' behaviors (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003) and on peer relationships (e.g., Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Hughes & Im, 2016). In contrast, conflictual student-teacher relationships have been associated with increased passive bystanding (Jungert, Piroddi, & Thornberg, 2016) and higher levels of peer victimization (Lucas-Molina, Williamson, Pulido, & Pérez-Albéniz, 2015).

Peer relationships, in turn, have been shown to influence students' aggressive behaviors: Students who experience rejection or exclusion by peers usually show more aggressive behaviors (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003), and in general bullying and other related behaviors are more frequent among students who experience low levels of social preference (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Mouttapa, Valente, Gallaher, Rohrbach, & Unger, 2004; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), consideration of the broader "ecological" system in which psychological phenomena occur is needed to reach a better understanding of the phenomena themselves. In accordance with this view, when studying bullying in schools and classrooms, assessing the student's relationships with both the staff and the peer group is needed to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Salmivalli, 1999). The present study seeks to improve our understanding of the relationship between student-teachers relationships and bullying-related behaviors by considering the moderating role of students' social statuses in the classroom.

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1. Student-teacher relationships and bullying

Student-teacher relationships are meaningful emotional and relational connections that develop between students and teachers as a result of prolonged interactions (Fraire, Longobardi, Prino, Sclavo, & Settanni, 2013; Longobardi, Prino, Marengo, & Settanni, 2016). Furthermore, student-teacher relationships can be considered scientifically and clinically relevant because they have the power to influence the behavior of each agent significantly (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). Additionally, the quality of these relationships has been proven to have a long-lasting impact on children's academic commitment and achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Positive student-teacher relationships have been shown to be vital for the positive development of children, as well as to support students' adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, promote academic performance, and foster their resilience in regard to academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Quaglia, Gastaldi, Prino, Pasta, & Longobardi, 2013; Settanni, Longobardi, Sclavo, Fraire, & Prino, 2015). Furthermore, teachers who shared warm relationships with students reported that the students were less likely to avoid school and appeared more self-directed, cooperative, and engaged in learning (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004). Moreover, students were found to be less likely to reject one another when teachers used practices that demonstrated caring and fostered interpersonal skills (Donohue, Perry, & Weinstein, 2003). Finally, positive student-teacher relationships were found to have an important influence on the social skills of difficult as well as typical students (Zins, Elias, Greenberg, & Weissberg, 2000) and to be associated with defender bystanding behavior in bullying situations (Jungert et al., 2016; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, & Espelage, 2016).

Bullying is defined as the repeated aggression of students who are less advantaged or powerful in their interactions with the bully or bullies; additionally, much bullying occurs without apparent provocation on the part of the victims (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Olweus, 1993; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). It has been identified as a pervasive problem in schools throughout the world (e.g., Eslea et al., 2003; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). According to a study carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2014, slightly more than 50% of 11–17-year-old Italians had been bullied by their peers during the past year. Of this sample, 19.8% were "typical" bully victims, as they were harassed more than once a month, and 9.1% of the sample were bullied on a weekly basis (ISTAT, 2014).

A satisfactory number of studies have already been published concerning the effects of student-teachers relationships on bullying. Roth, Kanat-Maymon, and Bibi (2011) found that students who experience a relationship with teachers that acknowledge their feelings, take their perspective, provide rationale, allow choice, and minimize pressure are more likely to develop and identified internalization of consideration toward classmates, which is, in turn, negatively related to self-reported bullying. Furthermore, a large number of studies, have associated warm and supportive student-teacher relationships with lower levels of antisocial and aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, and negative student-teacher relationships with an increased involvement in bullying and antisocial behaviors (e.g., DeBora, 2013; Gregory et al., 2010; Jalón & Arias, 2013; Longobardi, Prino, Fabris, & Settanni, 2017; Lucas-Molina et al., 2015; Richard, Schneider, & Mallet, 2012; Wang, Swearer, Lembeck, Collins, & Berry, 2015). Student-teacher relationships that are characterized by higher levels of conflict or negative expectations have been shown to increase student involvement in bullying-related behaviors (e.g., Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Santinello, 2008; Wang et al., 2015) and to influence pro-bully or passive by-standing behaviors via extrinsic motivation (Jungert et al., 2016). When referring to bullying-related behaviors, we mean to address all behaviors that can count as bullying, such as actively partaking in bullying (i.e., active bullying) or supporting bullies (i.e., pro-bullying). Pro-bullying can take the form of active participation, such as assisting bullies by holding down the victim, or passive participation, in which the assistants cheer on and encourage the bullies. In sum, the literature has shown that student-teacher relationships have a relevant effect on bullying and that their quality can significantly influence student behaviors, especially in the lower school grades (Wang et al., 2015).

2. Peer status and bullying

Healthy peer relationships are vital for the positive development of students' cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Ladd, 2005; Martín-Antón, Monjas, García Bacete, & Jiménez, 2016; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009), as well as their scholastic adaptation (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). In early adolescence, peer group integration is a key feature for maintaining a healthy developmental trajectory (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Engels et al., 2016; Hartup, 1989; Hay, Caplan, & Nash, 2009; Martín-Antón et al., 2016).

Furthermore, peer status and peer group integration have been found to be significantly linked to bullying, influencing the nature and extent of students' involvement in bullying activities (Caravita et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2003; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Juvonen & Galvan, 2008; Mouttapa et al., 2004; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Pellegrini et al. (1999) found that engaging in bullying enhanced within-group status and popularity among fifth graders. Similarly, Rodkin et al. (2000) discovered a category of aggressive but popular boys who, compared to their popular prosocial male classmates, received an equivalent number of "cool" ratings from their peers. Finally, peer status has been found to be predictive of negative school adjustment and of growth in aggressive behaviors (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Dodge et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

3. The present study

The primary hypothesis for our study was that students' social statuses might moderate the effect of student-teacher relationships quality on students' engagement in active bullying or pro-bully behaviors, given that peer group relationships and student-teacher