

Teacher-Targeted Bullying by Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The aim of our study was to gain insights into the teachers' targeted bullying from the perspective of teacher victims. We conducted a descriptive qualitative research design stemming from semi-structured interviews with the victims of teacher-targeted bullying. A thematic content analysis of the data was generated from interviews with 17 victimized teachers as a snowball sampling. The sample consisted of male (n=5) and female (n=12) participants from school locations in Prague, Czech Republic. The focus of our study was to determine how the teachers who had been experiencing bullying by their students described and perceived the nature and consequences of bullying. The findings indicate that the victims of teacher-targeted bullying were exposed repeatedly over long time to verbal and nonverbal attacks, ignoring and other threats directed against teachers. Our results prove bullying had a negative influence on the victims' private lives (family, colleagues), physical and mental health and self-esteem.

Keywords: Teacher-Targeted Bullying, Students, Secondary School

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1. Introduction

Teacher targeted bullying is a complex and multi-faceted problem. It is a underrecognised and underresearched topic, most probably due to its sensitivity. It is defined as “a communication process that involves a real or perceived power imbalance where a teacher is subjected, by one or more students, to interaction that he or she perceives as insulting, upsetting or intimidating; this may be verbal, nonverbal or physical in nature, it may be premeditated or opportunistic, be a single instance or recurring and or of short or long duration” (Kauppi and Pörhölä, 2012, Billet, Fogelgarn, Burns, 2019, 8, Koiv, K., Aia-Utsal, M, 2021).

Bullying and harassment of teachers means any unwanted student behaviour that makes teachers feel intimidated, degraded, humiliated or offended. It often happens in class in front of the eyes of other students. It may be persistent or an isolated incident. Although it often occurs face-to-face, it can also occur in written communications, by phone, via email or on social media.

Experimental data show some teachers are bullied daily by students (or by their parents), they experience the kind of harassment that would be deemed unacceptable in most workplaces. They report both physical and verbal threats and abuse.

Student-to-teacher bullying and harassment has been even recorded in countries such as Taiwan, where students are taught to revere teachers, and in Finland, where the teaching profession is well regarded. Verbal aggression seems the most common form of bullying. Nearly 30 % of respondents recorded a student having sworn at them in the last 9 to 12 months, closely followed by yelling (28 %) and disparaging verbal comments (25.5 %). Around 10 % of teachers had been hit or punched by a student in the last year, 12.5 % had a student damage their personal property and 16.6 % had a student stand over them or invade their personal space. Female teachers experienced student bullying and harassment more often than males – 71 % to 68.4 %. Female teachers were more likely to experience students standing over them or invading their personal space (9.9 % to 6.9 %), as well as students harassing them through phone calls or text messages (2.3 % to 1.4 %), (Bojcic, 2019).

The focus of this study is on the forms in which the bullying of school teachers by students manifests itself, the characteristics of the students who engage in the bullying, and the manner in which the students who engage in bullying behave in their own peer relationships. The data was gathered from secondary school teachers by means of an Internet survey. The answers of 17 teachers who had experienced bullying by their students are examined. The teachers had been exposed to different forms of bullying. They had typically been bullied by male students. In most cases, the bullying had been perpetrated by an individual student or a small group of students. According to the teachers' assessment, the majority of the students who bullied them also bullied their fellow students (Kaupi, Porhola, 2012).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and sampling

Our study followed a descriptive qualitative research design. Selection of the participants for this study was purposeful snowball sampling based on the sensitivity of the research topic. The sample consisted of male (n=5) and female (n=12) participants from a secondary

technical school and a secondary professional school. The mean age of the participants was 47 years, ranging from 32 to 59-year old. The average number of years in the teaching profession for the participants was 22 years.

2.2. Data collection

The questions were posed to the participants during the semi-structured interview based on questions developed from Pervin and Turner's (1998) measure of *Teacher Targeted Bullying* with focusing on participant's subjective experiences and perceptions in three areas – nature, influence and reasons attributed to teacher-targeted bullying. The participants were contacted individually and they agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview which was conducted in their school bureau. At the beginning of interview, authors discussed definition of bullying to reach clear understanding of the concept of bullying. Interviews were conducted until definite themes became evident and the information became saturated. Confidentiality of the teacher identity was expressed by researchers. Interviews lasted 45-140 minutes, they were audio-recorded and transcribed.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data gathered through transcribed interviews, keywords, meanings, and themes were evaluated during the analytic process, data were segregated, grouped, regrouped, and re-linked in order to unify meaning and explanation. Both authors read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions to strengthen the study.

3. Research results

Based on the objectives of our research these findings emerged from the collected data.

Substance of the teacher targeted bullying

Theme 1: Nature of TTB Characteristics of TTB Victimized participant teachers described bullying as "...a negative behavior that occurs repeatedly over time and causes distress" with characteristics of power imbalance between bully as a pupil and target as teacher. The aggressive acts against the teachers were described as intentional.

Teachers – participants of the interviews characterized bullying as intentional negative student behavior that occurred repeatedly over time and caused inconvenience to them. It was also characterized as a power imbalance between bully-student and target-teacher and was repetitional and long-lasting.

Forms of teacher targeted bullying

The prevalent form of bullying as characterized by victims was **verbal** ("teasing", name calling, shouting, verbal imitation), **nonverbal** (gestures, threatening signs, mimicking, caricature and dirty looks), **behavioral** (e.g. walking out of class, damaging school supplies, ignoring class activities), **relational** (gossiping, whispering, spreading rumors). No cyber bullying was mentioned in our research sample though. Teacher targeted bullying took generally form of several manifestations of student disruptive behavior (breaking discipline rules in class).

The consequences of bullying behaviors as reported by most teachers

“They increased my stress”

“They affected my health condition”

“They caused a bad atmosphere in the classroom”

“They decreased my expectations for students and for teaching profession”

“I had to modify my teaching methods”

“I started to hate some students”

“I decreased the number of activities I performed in the class”

Social context of teacher targeted bullying

Bullying became a group-based phenomenon in 3 cases as group of students repeatedly behaved in an adversarial way. Leaders of the peer group started bullying acts toward them to gain attention and gratification from other peers and to seek for support by bystanders in group context.

Consequences for victimized teachers

Personality effects

From the interviews with victimized teachers, it became clear that they often felt helpless, guilty, angry, humiliated in addressing acts of TTB. Also, negative outcomes for the participants were connected to negative career implications, with workplace and family stress. Many victimized teachers believed that their personal and work-related reputation and authority were damaged. The positive personal outcomes included a belief of respondents that the experience of taking effective action against the TTB had some personal worth or value for improving self-confidence and suggestions for future self-assertion strategies and skills to prevent or intervene in bullying incidents.

Teaching practice and attitudes towards teaching

Several participants were convinced their estimation of the teaching profession has changed as a result of their own negative experiences. They decided to use more passive teaching strategies and lowered their expectations in terms of behavior and teaching toward the learners who had been bullying them. As a result, they started purposely ignore misbehavior of bullies in the class.

Motivation for TTB

Motives connected with teacher personality

The participants pointed at several personal traits connected with bullying - being either provoked or intimidated by the perpetrators showing personal vulnerability of the bullying expressed in different ways. In some cases, participants acknowledged that they can become easily irritated as some learners purposely bully them, and if they lose his/her temper it brings him/her into disrepute with the principal. Victimized teachers expressed the feelings of personal powerlessness describing learners who bully them intentionally trying to disempower them.

Motives connected with student personality

Negative attitudes towards teachers and schoolwork were sometimes observed in student perpetrator's behavior as students missed control over their learning outcomes. Boredom was also mentioned as one reason why learners bullied their educators. They found their studies pointless.

Motives connected with student's family

Parents' unwillingness to discipline their children and regulate their inappropriate aggression may encourage teacher targeted bullying. Victimized teachers mentioned that parents often reinforced bullying as they did not instruct children to take responsibility for consequences of their behavior. Parents did not admit that their child was doing something wrong, they claimed their child had been bullied by the teacher.

Bullying and school and class social climate

Sometimes, victimized teachers do not open up with being bullied with their colleagues or school management. It may happen in case of beginning teachers (five from our research sample). Four teachers from our sample confirmed that listening and care attitude of their colleagues with suggestions to discipline aggressors helped them understand the situation and find self-management skills to tackle with bullying. Three teachers said they received no support from their colleagues and school management helping them to manage with bullying incidences (e.g. by changing the class they teach).

4. Conclusions

We summarized and structured data generated from personal interviews with seventeen secondary school teachers who had been bullied repeatedly and over long time by some of their students. Different forms of bullying were reported by victims: verbal („teasing“, name calling, shouting, imitating), nonverbal (gestures, threatening signs, mimicking, caricature and dirty looks), behavioral (walking out of class, damaging school supplies, ignoring class activities), relational (gossiping, whispering, spreading rumors). Misbehaving students were perceived as intentionally challenging the teacher's authority in order to disempower them. Teachers reported that effects of being bullied were long-lasting.

Motivation for teacher targeted bullying as suggested by teachers was connected with their own personal traits (vulnerability, lack of assertion, inexperience), students' personal traits and attitudes (no interest in learning, feelings of boredom, effort to attract attention of peers), family background (parents' aggression and unwillingness to discipline their children).

Teacher experiences with bullying undermined their self-confidence and self-esteem and had negative impact on their physical and mental health (sleep disorders, headache, digestive disorders). Negative experiences influenced their teaching methodology: they tended to use passive teaching strategies and lowered their learning outcomes expectations.

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