

Bullying

Elementary teachers' attitudes and intervention strategies

Jina S. Yoon Wayne State University

Karen Kerber Hazel Park Schools

Research has consistently documented that bullying behaviours are associated with serious short- and long-term outcomes for both victims and perpetrators. For example, Craig (1998) found that repeatedly victimised children are more likely to report internalising problems such as anxiety and depression. Bullying is also associated with peer rejection, early school drop-out, involvement in crime, and adult psychopathology (Crick, 1995; Parker and Asher, 1987).

Aggression and bullying in schools have become major concerns for educators. Classroom teachers face challenges to deal with a perpetrator and a victim, which means less time devoted to class work and instruction. Owing to the negative outcomes associated with bullying and victimisation, psychological and educational research continues to search for effective ways to address bullying behaviours. Proactive school-wide programmes have been proposed to prevent bullying behaviours (Olweus, 1991; Pepler *et al.*, 1994; Smith and Sharp, 1994). These programmes are designed to promote systematic changes in school culture against bullying behaviours or school violence. The systematic approach reflects current conceptualisation of bullying as 'an interaction that occurs between an individual bully and a victim and unfolds within a social ecological context' (Atlas and Pepler, 1998, p. 86). However, less attention has been given to individual teachers' responses to bullying behaviours. Given that teachers are the individuals most likely to handle a bullying incident (Smith and Sharp, 1994; Smith and Thompson, 1991), they play an important role in creating a positive school climate. Teachers' responses should be carefully examined and teachers' roles also should be considered in prevention and intervention of bullying behaviours.

Teachers' responses to bullying behaviours may influence future behaviours of both victims and perpetrators. Huesmann and Eron (1984) explain that bullying behaviours are reinforced when a bully successfully dominates a victim and does not experience negative consequences (i.e. punishments). That is, unless appropriate consequences are consistently and immediately given after each bullying episode, bullying behaviours have a greater chance of recurring in the future, especially when there is continuing success in

exerting control over a victim. However, teacher reports indicate that bullies often go without punishment for their behaviour, thus reinforcing the bullying behaviours. More alarming is a recent study that suggests teachers and other school staff model bullying behaviours (Song and Swearer, 2002).

Furthermore, evidence suggests a discrepancy between teachers' and students' reports of intervention with respect to bullying. According to Pepler *et al.* (1994), 85 per cent of teachers reported intervening 'always' or 'often' to stop bullying. However, only 35 per cent of students reported that teachers intervened in bullying. This discrepancy leads to the important question of how teachers perceive and respond to bullying incidents.

Siann *et al.* (1994) argue that 'when an individual applies the label of "bullying" to an interpretational interaction, there is bound to be at least an element of subjectivity which relates to the individual's social construction of the incident' (p. 133). This subjective interpretation of bullying incidents is based on their perceptions and attitudes about students' bullying behaviours and is most likely to influence the course of their actions following the incident. For example, if teachers are not fully aware of the extent to which bullying affects students or do not perceive bullying behaviours as serious, they will have passive attitudes towards bullying, and effective intervention efforts are unlikely.

Researchers have identified three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and social exclusion (Olweus, 1993). Physical and verbal types of bullying are referred to as direct bullying, since they are both overt attacks on the victim (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1991). Social exclusion has been referred to as indirect bullying because it involves manipulation of the social status of an individual within a peer group by changing how others feel and act towards that individual (Bjorkqvist *et al.*, 1992; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1988). Similar to this definition, the term *relational aggression* has been used to include a wider range of indirect bullying such as giving someone the 'silent treatment' to manipulate them, using rumours or gossip about someone, or threatening to end a friendship unless the friend complies with a request (Crick, 1995).

Special attention is warranted for indirect bullying because its covert nature makes it much more challenging for teachers to detect. Craig and Pepler (1997) report that teachers are less likely to observe acts of social exclusion because these behaviours are brief and covert. In fact, Boulton (1997) found that a significant proportion of teachers did not view social exclusion as bullying. These findings indicate that teachers' strategies most likely differ in dealing with direct and indirect aggression.

The purposes of this study were to investigate teachers' attitudes toward three types of bullying behaviours and to examine disciplinary strategies used by teachers. The study extends the current literature by examining teacher interventions in response to several different, but specific, bullying incidents. Hypothetical situations were used to measure teachers' perceived seriousness and empathy in response to specific bullying behaviours, whereas previous studies used survey methods that included measures of global teacher characteristics, not necessarily linked with bullying situations.

The specific research questions were: (1) Do teachers have different attitudes toward bullying incidents? (2) What are the strategies used by teachers in addressing students' social exclusion? (3) Do these teacher strategies for social exclusion differ from those used for more direct bullying? It was hypothesised that, compared with verbal and physical bullying, teachers (1) perceive social exclusion less seriously, (2) feel less sympathetic to victims of social exclusion, and (3) are less likely to intervene in social exclusion episodes. It was also hypothesised that when addressing students' verbal and physical bullying teachers use more direct intervention, dealing with the situation themselves and using disciplinary actions. However, they were expected to use more indirect and lenient strategies to punish students who engaged in social exclusion, thus less involved in a disciplinary process with the perpetrators.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of ninety-four elementary teachers (twenty-six males and sixty-eight females) enrolled in graduate-level classes in Education at a large urban state university in the Mid-west. A questionnaire was distributed and collected in class. Most of the participants (80 per cent) were certified teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to twenty-five years (mean = six years). The ethnic composition was Caucasian (56 per cent), African-American (32 per cent), Hispanic (2 per cent), and other/missing (8 per cent).

Measures

The Bullying Attitude Questionnaire (Craig *et al.*, 2000) was modified and used in the current study. Modifications made to the questionnaire included changing some scenarios to make the bullying seem less ambiguous, and using only witnessed bullying situations. This questionnaire was used to assess teachers' perceived seriousness of bullying, their likelihood of intervention, their empathy toward victims, and the types of intervention strategy they would employ. In this questionnaire the participants were presented with six vignettes (two physical, two verbal, and two social exclusion). These vignettes are described in the appendix. The vignettes depicted each bullying incident not as an isolated incident but as a repeated pattern of behaviour. To avoid bias created by the order of the vignettes, the order of these three types of vignette was counterbalanced.

Seriousness. Following the description of each vignette, teachers were asked to rate each bullying behaviour in terms of seriousness (ranging from 1, not at all serious, to 5, very serious). Mean scores for seriousness were computed for each bullying situation (verbal, physical, and social exclusion). Cronbach alpha, a measure of internal consistency, for this scale ($n = 6$) was 0.65, based on the participants' scores in the study.

Empathy toward victims. Instead of measuring empathy of teachers as a global construct, as in Craig *et al.* (2000), we measured teachers' level of empathy toward specific victims of the three types of bullying. Teachers were asked to indicate how sympathetic they would feel toward the victim depicted in each vignette. On a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) they rated a statement such as 'I would feel sympathetic toward the victim'. Cronbach alpha for Empathy scale ($n = 6$), based on the sample, was 0.78.

Likelihood. In addition, teachers were asked to indicate how likely they were to intervene in each situation, using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (very likely). Mean scores were calculated for three bullying situations. Cronbach alpha for this scale, based on the sample, was 0.62.

Teacher involvement in intervention. Teachers were asked to explain how they would respond to the perpetrators in each situation. A researcher knowledgeable in teachers' disciplinary strategies read the written responses and created an initial rating system that reflect different levels of teacher involvement. Two raters rated a sample of thirty responses, using the original rating system, which led to a revision of the rating criteria (Table 1). Then it was tested on the same sample, and there was 89 per cent of agreement between the two raters.

Table 1 Descriptions of rating criteria for teacher involvement in bullying

Rating	Description	Example
1	No intervention	Ignoring
2	Peer resolution	Have themselves talk about their problems
3	Discuss rules with the whole class	Have class discussions with my students
4	Indication of intolerable behaviours	Sit down with the student and discuss that bullying behaviour is not acceptable
5	Discipline students' bullying behaviours	Privileges are immediately taken away, time-out
6	Report to higher authority; inform parents	Send the student to the office Call parents

Teachers' written responses were rated on a six-point scale to indicate the extent to which teachers and other school personnel deal with the perpetrators. A higher score indicated more involvement of a teacher and other school personnel. The rating criteria are described in Table 1. Inter-rater agreement was 92 per cent for level of involvement. Any disagreement was resolved through discussion between the first author and the two raters. Internal consistency estimates for Involvement ($n = 6$) was 0.55. (Note that the internal consistency values obtained in this study are somewhat depressed. This is attributable to the small number of items on each sub-scale.)

Table 2 Teacher attitude and intervention strategies, by bullying situation

Variable	Bullying situation		
	Verbal mean (SD)	Physical mean (SD)	Social exclusion mean (SD)
Seriousness	4.04 ^a (0.62)	4.39 ^b (0.63)	3.13 ^c (0.70)
Empathy	4.10 ^a (0.70)	4.12 ^a (0.83)	3.59 ^b (0.70)
Likelihood	4.45 ^a (0.49)	4.52 ^a (0.57)	3.40 ^b (0.77)
Involvement	4.60 ^a (0.65)	5.00 ^b (0.98)	3.82 ^c (0.75)

Note Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < 0.01$.

Results

The first purpose of the study was to examine whether or not teachers have different attitudes toward three types of bullying behaviours (verbal bullying, physical bullying, and social exclusion). To answer this question, a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with seriousness as the dependent variable and one independent variable (three types of bullying situation). Nominal alpha was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. The same procedure was separately followed for empathy and likelihood. The Mauchley sphericity tests were not significant in all analyses, indicating that the underlying assumption was met. The ANOVA results showed that teacher attitudes were statistically significantly different in response to the three bullying situations: for seriousness, $F(df = 2, 146) = 117.78, p = 0.000$; for empathy, $F(df = 2, 140) = 24.71, p = 0.000$; and for likelihood, $F(df = 2, 144) = 112.38, p = 0.000$.

Given the overall F values were statistically significant, *post hoc* comparisons were employed and are compiled in Table 2. For seriousness, empathy, and likelihood of intervention, teacher ratings were lower for social exclusion than verbal and physical bullying. At the nominal alpha of 0.05 no statistically significant differences between verbal and physical bullying were observed in teacher ratings of empathy and likelihood, except seriousness. Teachers rated physical bullying more seriously than verbal bullying ($p = 0.00$).

The second purpose of the study was to investigate the level of teacher involvement in interventions for each type of bullying. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to answer this question. A statistically significant difference was found in teacher involvement: $F(df = 2, 130) = 44.82, p = 0.000$. Repeated measures t tests (see Table 2) indicated that teachers were more likely to get involved in physical and verbal bullying than in social exclusion.

Follow-up analysis indicated that 10 per cent of teacher responses for social exclusion involved disciplining the perpetrators, whereas about 50 per cent of teacher responses for verbal and physical bullying did. The modal teacher response to social exclusion involved talking to the students (59 per cent). About 10 per cent of teacher responses included ignoring and having students 'work it out'.

Discussion

The study investigated teachers' attitudes regarding three types of bullying: verbal, physical, and social exclusion. Of particular interest was examining how teachers intervene in response to these bullying situations, particularly teachers' involvement in dealing with perpetrators. The results of this study support previous findings that teachers view social exclusion less seriously, and are less likely to intervene than in the cases of verbal and physical aggression. Furthermore, our analyses indicated that, when addressing students' social exclusion, teachers were less sympathetic to the victim and were less likely to get involved, resulting in solutions such as 'have the perpetrator and the victim talk about their problems'. They also reported using more lenient intervention strategies (i.e. ignoring).

Teachers' passive approach to dealing with social exclusion is alarming. Previous findings link social exclusion, widely termed relational aggression, with difficulties in several aspects of social and psychological adjustment for both perpetrators (Crick, 1997; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) and victims (Bigbee and Grotpeter, 1995; Boulton and Underwood, 1992). Absence of consistent, effective disciplinary responses in class is most likely reinforcing of socially exclusive behaviours. That is, teachers' ignoring of these behaviours is likely to set the tone for the classes, sending an inappropriate message that social exclusion is tolerated and even permitted.

Teachers' responses to a bullying incident also affect victims. A teacher's passive actions with a perpetrator may be perceived by the victims as the teacher being uncaring or unable to protect them. Within this permissive context, the victims may fear retaliation from the perpetrator if they 'tattle', so the victims are less likely to report in the future that they are being bullied (Pepler *et al.*, 1994). As a result of inconsistency in or lack of appropriate intervention, victims will remain silent and continue to be victimised.

The results of this study suggest important implications for future intervention and prevention of indirect aggression and bullying behaviours in school. The results certainly indicate that many teachers do not take social exclusion seriously, although empirical data clearly encourage them to do so. Given this, teachers need to be better informed about the nature and impact of social exclusion. Understanding the social and psychological maladjustment associated with the perpetrators and victims of social exclusion would then be expected to change teachers' perceptions and attitudes.

It may be particularly challenging for teachers to attend to social exclusion. Observational data suggest that children are quite skilled at hiding this kind of social behaviour from teachers (Craig *et al.*, 2000). The covert nature of social exclusion warrants more systematic efforts at prevention. Teachers need to be made aware of the behavioral patterns of the perpetrators and victims. Victims of direct and indirect bullying are often rejected and neglected by their peers (Bigbee and Grotpeter, 1995; Perry *et al.*, 1988). Although research findings on gender differences are not conclusive at this point, victimisation experiences of social exclusion seem to be more damaging to girls

(Crick *et al.*, 2001). In addition, several studies in the relational aggression literature report significant overlap between relational victimisation and relational aggression (Crick and Bigbee, 1998). Then, victims of social exclusion may be also perpetrators themselves.

Victimised children would benefit from discussing their experiences with their teacher and setting up proactive plans that reduce the risk of repeated victimisation. Class and school rules should reflect strong disapproval of socially exclusive behaviours, and should be clearly communicated to students. Of great importance is creating a class environment and a school climate that discourage any types of aggressive behaviour and bullying, including social exclusion. Within this safe environment, victims are more likely to come forward and less likely to be repeatedly victimised. Children who experience repeated victimisation in peer group and exhibit maladjustment warrant immediate attention. Further intervention efforts may include social skills training that focuses on assertive, pro-social skills.

The study used hypothetical situations in assessing teacher attitude and strategies. This method is unique in that it presents teachers with realistic situations and assesses teachers' attitudes and perceptions specific to each of three kinds of bullying situation. Other assessment techniques such as playground and classroom observation would offer even more accurate pictures of teachers' attitudes and actual behaviours in response to different types of bullying exhibited by students. Future studies are clearly needed to replicate the current findings using additional methods of data collection and to identify other teacher characteristics that influence teacher responses to bullying and aggressive behaviours. For example, teachers' perceived self-efficacy in managing bullying behaviours and teachers' tolerance levels may be important variables to consider in examining teacher responses. Meanwhile the results of this study highlight the importance of teachers having a better understanding of social exclusion and a proactive approach in addressing this socially undesirable behaviour.

Appendix Six bullying vignettes

Verbal bullying

- 1 At the writing centre you hear a student chant to another child, 'Teacher's pet, browner, suck-up, kiss-ass.' The child tries to ignore the remarks but sulks at his desk. You saw the same thing happen the other day.
- 2 Your class is getting ready to go to lunch and the kids are in line at the door. You hear a kid say to another child, 'Hey, give me your lunch money or I'll give you a fat lip.' The child complies at once. It is not the first time this has happened.

Physical bullying

- 3 A student brings a dinosaur-shaped eraser to school. He boasts that it was a prize from a game arcade. Another child goes over and smacks his head, demanding the eraser. The child refuses at first, but eventually gives in.

- 4 As your kids return from music class you see a student kick another child without provocation. Bruising is evident. The student has been known to indulge in this type of behaviour before.

Social exclusion

- 5 During project time you overhear a child say to another, 'If you don't let me have the purple marker I won't invite you to my birthday party.' It is not the first time you have heard the child say this type of thing.
- 6 You have allowed the kids in your class to have a little free time because they've worked so hard today. You witness a kid say to another, 'No, absolutely not. I already told you that you can't play with us.' The student is isolated and plays alone for the remaining time with tears in her eyes. It is not the first time this child has isolated someone from playing.

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Address for correspondence

Dr Jina Yoon, 347 Education, Educational Psychology, College of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit MI 48202, USA. E-mail jyoon@wayne.edu.