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DESCRIPTION OF TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ON BEING
BULLIED BY STUDENTS



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Abstract

The present study examined attitudes, nature and effect of teacher-targeted bullying by students that differentiated teachers as victims of student and student/adult bullying in school settings. A total of 395 teachers as three-stage cluster sampling in Estonia completed a self-reported measure to determine the victim-categories (victims of student bullying n=77; victims of adult bullying n=17; victims of student/adult bullying n=49; and non-victims n=250), whereby teachers with victimization experiences of student bullying were included into this study. The descriptive analysis of self-reported survey revealed that: (1) lack of positive values toward the teacher-targeted bullying (TTB) in the community and public level, and severe physical and indirect ongoing forms of TTB were more prevalent among teachers with student/adult victimization experiences compared with TTB victimization group of teachers; (2) active disciplining-punitive ways and exclusion for managing to stop the TTB were more frequently described by student/adult victims compared with passive ways of lowering academical expectations toward student performance as ways of handling TTB among victims of student bullying; (3) less school-based and personal networking support was available for teachers with student victimization experiences compared with teachers as victims of student/adult bullying, whereby the characteristics and reasons why pupils carry out TTB were generally the same for both study groups. Results from the study suggested that the single- and multi-target TTB victimization experiences for teachers in terms of specific attitudes, nature and effects to the TTB may play a role in teacher-targeted bullying from pupils.

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Keywords: Teacher-targeted bullying, teacher victimization, student-teacher relationship.

1. Introduction

Stemming historically from school bullying the definition of bullying in different contexts (e.g. dating, prison, workplace) has three major characteristics: aggressive behaviour directed at another party with the aim to hurt or cause harm, repetitiveness over time and an interpersonal power imbalance between the victim and the bully (Monks & Coyne, 2011). The school context is different from any other working environment with multiple individuals (students and adults: colleagues, superiors, parents, other staff members) who contribute the bullying against teachers, and victimization comes most prevalently from the students with escalating tendency (Kõiv, 2015).

Teacher-directed violence (including bullying) by students is an issue around the world with increasing research interest over past few decades in many cultural context (Longobardi et al., 2019; Montgomery, 2019) and with challenges for conceptual clarity of the phenomenon of teachers as targets of bullying by students – teacher-targeted bullying (TTB), providing the causal direction of who is bullying whom (Burns et al., 2020). The bullying of teachers by students differs in nature from school and workplace bullying taking place at peer level. TTB involves the bullying of an adult by a child in school context with the power differential is overturned – the student achieves greater power over the teacher (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a).

Although teacher-targeted bullying has been studied since the late nineties (Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998) in England, as one branch of boarder teacher-directed violence, this type of bullying has received limited research attention in various (e.g. Australia, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey) countries. Studies on the TTB have predominantly examined the problem in terms of nature, prevalence and negative effects among teachers (quantitatively: Benefield, 2004; Billett et al., 2019; De Wet, 2006; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Kõiv, 2015; Özkiliç, 2012; Özkiliç & Kartal, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Santos & Tin, 2018; Uz & Bayraktar, 2019; Terry, 1998; Woudstra et al., 2018); among teachers as victims of TTB (qualitatively: Bester et al., 2017; De Wet, 2010, 2012; quantitatively: Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a, 2012b), among students (quantitatively: James et al., 2008) and also carried on via social media (qualitatively: De Wet, 2019).

2. Problem Statement

Focusing theoretically from a social-ecological and methodologically from victims' descriptive perspective teachers tended to be vulnerable to targeting by students bullying across several personal (e.g. easily provoked by the learners, unpopular, being young, inexperienced teachers), institutional (e.g. lack of support, lack of knowledge to discipline and identify bullies), and social (e.g. lack of positive values towards teachers in the community, disregard for teacher authority, poor school policies on bullying) variables (De Wet, 2012). Only some quantitatively designed studies have assessed the bullying status of teachers among bullied and non-bullied teachers as victims of student bullying with respect to identify personal variables related to their victimization, but to the authors' knowledge no studies have examined the potential differences in victim-categories among teachers. Research results showed that there were no differences among TTB bullied and non-bullied participant teachers in terms of gender (Özkiliç, 2012), but bullied teachers by their students compared with non-bullied teachers had lower scores in self-efficacy in terms of student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management (Özkiliç, 2014); and

bullied teachers by their students, adults and students/adults had lower scores in current insecure (avoidant and anxious/ambivalent) attachment styles compared with non-bullied teachers (Kõiv, 2016a). Also, it was revealed that teachers as victims of students bullying compared with nonvictims had lower competence in the area of virtual teaching connected with virtual/technical, pedagogical, expert/cognitive and social dispositions (Kõiv, 2016b); and classroom management skills in terms of physical order/time management and teacher-student relationship (Uz & Bayraktar, 2019). Thus, it might be a useful methodologically to distinguish teachers experiencing victimization perpetrated by students as distinct from other sources – colleagues, managers, parents, other staff members as adult perpetrators in school context for identifying teachers' personal variables as risk factors to the development of the teacher-targeted bullying.

3. Research Questions

Methodologically, previous studies (Kõiv, 2016a, 2016b; Özkiliç, 2012, 2014; Uz & Bayraktar, 2019) on the teacher-targeted bullying have concerned with victim/non-victim status generally; this study focuses on different victim categories – victims of students and victims of student/adult bullying. These challenges suggest that there is a need to gather data from teachers' self-reports about their experiences of victimization based on single (pupils) and multiple perpetrators (students and adults), and describe and compare the attitudes, nature and effects of bullying among this two studygroups. The central research question addressed by the study was: What are the differences in descriptions of teacher-targeted bullying between teachers with student and with student/adult victimization experiences?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to describe differences between attitudes, nature and effect of teacher-targeted bullying among teachers taking into account two victim categories – victims of student bullying, and victims of student/adult bullying. It was generally predicted that attitudes, nature and effect of the TTB would vary by the victim-categories (victims of student bullying versus victims of student/adult bullying) among teachers.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study design

This study followed a descriptive research design and survey estimates derived from a stratified, multi-stage cluster sample: in the first stage randomly selected five schools were selected from all separate districts from Estonia corresponds to the ratio of different types of schools in the whole-country school sample; in the second stage of sampling all teachers from in each school were selected; and during stage three groups of teachers without victimization experiences and with different victim-categories were identified.

5.2. Instrument and data analysis

A questionnaire, adapted from the one used by Pervin and Turner (1998) as 16-item measure of Teacher Targeted Bullying, was compiled to use as a data-gathering instrument. The cover letter of the e-

questionnaire provided the definition of TTB by Pervin and Turner (1998). Pervin and Turner's (1998) original measure was categorical in nature with a single-item measure that asks respondents whether or not they had been subjected to bullying by their learners over the duration of their career. To obtain a more fine-grained measure of teachers' victimization, a three-point scale (never, often, very often) was added to items to measure the frequency of bullying of teachers by students and by adults (colleagues, managers, parents and other staff members) in school context over the teaching career. A person was considered a victim when he/she reported being bullied "often" or "very often". Participants were classified into one of four categories: "nonvictims", "victims of student bullying", "victims of adult bullying", or "victims of student/adult bullying", whereby the last victim-category consisted subjects who had been both victims of student bullying and victims of adult bullying.

Data analysis was carried out by descriptive means – percentual frequencies of categories of items were calculated, whereby the respondents were given an opportunity to select more than one alternative across items of the measure of Teacher Targeted Bullying (see Appendix, first column). A chi-square test was used to explore the differences between teachers' study groups given for their victimization. The level for significance was set to $p < .05$.

5.3. Participants and data collection

In total, 393 teachers participated, representing a 61.8% response rate in relation to the online format individually sent questionnaire. Whole sample consisted of 344 females (87.5%) and 49 males (12.5%). The mean age of the subjects was 41.34 years ($SD=10.42$) with youngest subject was 20 years old and the oldest was 67 years old. The average number of years in the teaching profession for the participants was 14.98 years ($SD=5.75$).

6. Findings

Within whole sample ($n=393$), 250 (63.6%) of respondents were classified as teachers without bullying experiences; 17 (4.5%) of respondents have classified as teachers with workplace victimization experiences; 77 (19.6%) as victims of students bullying; and 49 (12.5%) as victims of students and adult school staff bullying (henceforward: victims of students/adult bullying), whereby two groups of teachers with victimization experiences of student bullying were included into this study by using a self-reported questionnaire for the measurement of the TTB in three areas: attitudes toward TTB, the nature and effect of TTB. Appendix show the percentages of the two victim-categories groups of respondents across questionnaire items. A series of pairwise chi-square tests were conducted to examine the differences between two study groups; and only statistically significant differences are highlighted in the text.

6.1. Attitudes toward the teacher-targeted bullying

More than half of teachers who took part in this study perceive that the TTB is a serious problem prevailing among most staff members at schools. Also, the general feeling was that teachers who were new to the school or inexperienced were more likely to suffer from TTB. However, teachers with student/adult bullying experiences compared with teachers with TTB experiences had widespread negative attitude toward the understanding and support of the TTB problem in school, educational and publicity level.

6.2. Nature of the teacher-targeted bullying

More than one third of the victimized teachers said they had suffered from TTB early on their teaching career and nearly one fourth of them claimed to have been victims of TTB for several years, whereby teachers as victims of student/adult bullying compared with teachers bullied by students revealed more often ongoing victimization.

Among the different types of TTB verbal abuse and ignoring of the teachers were found to be the most predominant forms of abuse among both studygroup respondents, but serious direct (physical bullying and damaging property) and indirect bullying prevailed among victims of student/adult bullying compared with victims of student bullying, whereby cyberbullying was less prevalent form of TTB bullying.

Victims of the TTB of the present study had typically been bullied by male students, but victims of student bullying said that they were bullied by secondary school (Years 8 and more) students versus victims of student/adult bullying revealed bullying more often by primary school (Years 5 and 6) students. Both studygroup members of the teachers characterized pupils who carried out TTB as difficult students for other teachers to deal with and academically less able pupils.

Teachers with TTB experiences said more often that the TTB took place in regular lessons in the classroom and teachers with student/adult bullying experiences revealed more that the TTB occurred outside of lessons in corridors, schoolyard and dining rooms. Both studygroup teachers reported that the TTB took place in situations where pupils felt it was “cool” to undermine teachers’ authority with revealing other teaching-related (studying is boring, hard, demanding), student-related (background) and school-related (ineffective discipline policy) reasons for the TTB.

6.3. Effect of the teacher-targeted bullying

Most of the victimized teachers (more than 80%) in this study expressed that they have modified their teaching style to handle with the TTB; a half of respondents expressed that ongoing TTB caused bad atmosphere in the classroom with feeling of fear professional safety in the classroom.

The ways teachers handled the TTB problem tended to be different among two participants’ groups: victims of TTB reported that they made class work easier and lowered their expectations in terms of behaviour and academic output versus victims of student/adult bullying took the active measure of changing schools, changing the class they teach or having removed pupils from class in order to put a stop to TTB. Also, more teachers as victims of students bullying compared with other study group members stated that they felt themselves incompetent with dealing the TTB incidents; and more victims of student/adult bullying reported that they have suffered increased amount of workplace stress.

Nearly one third of the participant teachers stated that the help they had received helped to solve the TTB victimization problem or give short improvements or remained unsolved. Most TTB victims (more than 60%) in this study did discuss their TTB experience with colleagues, whereby teachers as victims of student bullying compared with victim of students/adults bullying more often do not responded to the bullying by taking school-level (informing the management) and personal-level (informing their own family members) action. Additionally, the first mentioned group of respondents reported more often that there was no mechanism for staff support in the school, but both study group members did not accept the TTB as a normal part of teaching.

7. Conclusion

Present findings supported the notion that differences in the TTB in terms of specific attitudes, nature and effects exist between teachers as single-targets of student bullying and multi-targets of student and adult bullying in school context. General prediction was supported and specified comparing teachers as targets of student bullying with teachers as targets of student/adult bullying across three domains of the TTB experiences.

Firstly, the investigation into the profile of the most likely victims of the TTB support previous (e.g. De Wet, 2012; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Özkılıç, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998) studies that TTB victim-participants believed that the inexperience of new teachers may be risk factors for TTB. However, teachers as multi-targets of students and adult bullying felt more frequently than teachers as victims of student bullying that a certain extent the publicity, educational and school authorities were sceptical of the quality of understanding and support they received to strive against teacher-targeted bullying by students. Similarly, other studies (Benefield, 2004; De Wet, 2012; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998) have emphasized that being bullied can affect the morale of teachers and values in the society as risk for the TTB, this study was in the line of differentiating victimization risk group – multi-target victimized teaches were more vulnerable to broad society risk factors concerning with negative attitudes toward TTB. Society and educational authorities should be fully aware of the problems faced by teachers within the school context seek out necessary educational resources to strengthen attitudes and values against teacher-targeted bullying.

Secondly, findings of present study were consistent with previous studies which cite verbal abuse and ignoring as the most prevalent forms of TTB (Benefield, 2004; De Wet, 2006, 2010; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; James et al., 2008; Kõiv, 2015; Özkılıç, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Santos & Tin, 2018; Terry, 1998; Woudstra et al., 2018,) among teachers, however differentiating teachers' victim-categories groups – teachers, who were multi-target victims of pupils' and adults' bullying in school were more likely to exhibit ongoing serious physical and indirect forms of the TTB from younger students mostly outside the classroom settings versus teachers' experiences in the area of nature of the TTB who were single-target victims of students bullying. In accordance with previous research (e.g. Özkılıç, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998; Woudstra et al., 2018), this study found that victims of TTB reported that the TTB mostly occurred during class time in the classrooms, but teachers as victims of student/adult bullying indicated that they were bullied by students mostly outside of lessons in corridors and places other outside the school.

Following the previous studies (De Wet, 2012; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a; Pervin & Turner, 1998) multi-target and single-target TTB victimized teachers assumed that they were bullied by academically disadvantaged students challenging the teachers' authority in order to disempower them for student-related and teaching duties-related attributions. Overall, victimized teachers perceived the TTB in school setting as serious prolonged in duration and prevalent problem to disempower teachers mostly due to teaching-learning related reasons, whereby the nature of the TTB among two victim-categories groups of teachers was different – multi-target victims of students' and adults' bullying have experienced more likely ongoing serious physical and indirect bullying by younger pupils carried out TTB during regular lessons and also outside classrooms versus single-target victims of student bullying have experienced more likely verbal

abuse and ignoring by older pupils carried out TTB during regular lessons. Although causality cannot be assumed, there revealed relationship between complex nature of the teacher-targeted bullying and teachers experiencing victimization in different levels of relations at school, this study has demonstrated that this area of focus requires further investigation to find anti-bullying intervention programs components focusing on promoting the quality of teacher-student interactions at classroom and outside of classroom.

Thirdly, the findings of present study are consistent with previous research demonstrating the negative influence of TTB on teaching and learning (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; James et al., 2008; Özkiliç & Kartal, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998), but differentiated single and multiple victims of teacher-targeted bullying in three areas: teachers' performance to handle the TTB; effects on the personal vulnerability of the TTB; and support networks at school concerning with reporting the TTB.

At one side, present study confirmed previous (De Wet, 2010; Özkiliç & Kartal, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Santos & Tin, 2018) works that victims of TTB had used more passive strategies for handling the TTB with lowering their expectations in terms of behaviour, co-operation and academic output of learners who bullied them, but at the other side – evidence was found, that teachers with student/adult victimization experiences endorsed more likely reactive disciplining-punishing and exclusion strategies in order to handle the TTB than victimized teaches who have experienced student bullying at schools. Parallel with this finding is recognition that teachers with workplace victimization experiences by adults tended to use more reactive strategies – disciplining-punishing bullying perpetrators compared with non-victims (Kõiv, 2019).

Among personal factors that can make teachers vulnerable to teacher-targeted bullying listed in this study and previously (De Wet, 2012; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Özkiliç, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998) as being young/new and inexperienced were two personal factors differentiated teachers as victims of student bullying and victims of student/adult bullying in this study: teachers as multiple targets of victimization expressed increased levels of workplace stress following general relationship between exposure to TTB and teachers' poor mental health (Billett et al., 2019; De Wet, 2010; Özkiliç & Kartal, 2012; Santos & Tin, 2018; Woudstra et al., 2018) studies; and teachers as single targets of students bullying perceived themselves more incompetent in managing the TTB, which result is parallel comparing victims of TTB with non-victims in terms of poor teaching self-efficacy and classroom management skills (Özkiliç, 2014; Uz & Bayraktar, 2019; Kõiv, 2016b).

However, it appears previously and, in this study, that teachers as victims of teacher-targeted bullying have some forms of support system, because they related discussing their TTB experiences mainly with colleagues (Billett et al., 2019; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Özkiliç & Kartal, 2012; Woudstra et al., 2018), while the results of this study suggested that teachers as victims of student bullying were a highly vulnerable group displaying seriously compromised social support networks at school. Namely, teachers as victims of student targeted bullying compared with victims of student/adult bullying more often do not responded to the bullying by taking school-level action against the bullies by informing about the incident the management of the school and their own family members, whereby victims of student bullying stated prevalently that there was poor school policies on bullying in schools. It is evident that collegial social support had a central role in the TTB victimized teachers' coping processes (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a) and can function with a positive professional working climate and ability to solve problems constructively as an inhibitor of TTB and exhaustion (Phyältö et al., 2015). Thus, crucial for prevention of

the TTB is a whole-school approach that teachers – especially teachers who suffer from student targeted bullying, should be supported by some kind of mentoring systems by their colleagues and principals to contribute the secure learning-teaching school practice in workplace.

This study indicated that not only teachers' bullying status, but also teachers' victimization categories can be contributing as a risk factor to the development of the TTB. In general, a deeper understanding of the factors that are associated with TTB victimization will better prevent and deal effectively with the socially sensitive and whole-school managed problem occurring across different relationships levels in school context.

The current results, although providing some new direction insights into the teacher-targeted bullying essence quality across different victimization experiences among teachers, are not without limitations. The overrepresentation of woman in the samples in school settings made it impossible to make conclusions about gender differences. The results of the current study were based on self-reports made by teachers and recall bias may result in over- or under-reporting of socially sensitive theme, and the exploration of the phenomenon from the perspective from learners' viewpoint is an issue of future analysis.

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Appendix. Survey themes and items about teacher target bullying (TTB) and descriptive analysis of findings of two study groups of victimized teachers

Themes and items of the questionnaire	Victims of student bullying n=77 Response (%)	Victims of student and adult bullying n=49 Response (%)	χ^2 values
Perceived TTB behaviour as a problem			
No real problem	6%	1%	ns
Some cause for concern	30%	22%	ns
Serious but bearable	58%	55%	ns
Severe and unbearable	21%	22%	ns
Perceived TTB behaviour as a problem not understood			
by the school management (yes)	14%	48%	13.48**
by educational authorities (yes)	58%	86%	6.03*
by parents and general public (yes)	66%	93%	8.96*
Perceived frequency of the TTB behaviour			
Teachers new to the school	44%	41%	ns
A minority of teachers	4%	0%	ns
Inexperienced teachers	31%	29%	ns
Most staff (more than 50%)	56%	63%	ns
All teachers	8%	6%	ns
Duration of the TTB			
Weeks	18%	18%	ns
Month	20%	22%	ns
Years	26%	28%	ns
It happens early on your teaching career	36%	39%	ns
Ongoing	31%	71%	19.49**
Form of the TTB			
Verbal	94%	98%	ns
Ignoring	75%	81%	ns
Physical	23%	65%	21.99**
Indirect	44%	78%	13.63**
Damaging property	35%	71%	15.84**
Cyber	10%	14%	ns
Students' gender carried out the TTB			
Boys	79%	88%	ns
Girls	11%	8%	ns
Both boys and girls	9%	4%	ns
Year groups of students involved in the TTB			
Year 5	22%	65%	23.54**
Year 6	23%	63%	20.05**
Year 7	36%	39%	ns
Year 8	35%	20%	10.99**
Year 9 and more	40%	14%	6.88*
Characteristics of pupils carried out the TTB			
Difficult pupils for most teachers to deal with	83%	90%	ns

Academically less able pupils	83%	86%	ns
Sites of the TTB			
TTB take place during regular lessons	86%	55%	14.52**
TTB take place outside regular lessons	14%	45%	14.52**
Sites of the TTB outside the classroom			
Corridors in breaktime	31%	82%	20.51**
Schoolyard	10%	39%	11.41**
Dining room	8%	33%	10.34**
Reasons why pupils carry out the TTB			
Emulating peers – “cool” to be disruptive in order to disempower teacher	83%	89%	ns
Work is too hard for them	45%	51%	ns
Work is too boring for them	31%	30%	ns
Pupils behave like this when you put increased intellectual demands on them	34%	30%	ns
Pupils come from background where education is not evaluated	53%	61%	ns
Lack of effective discipline policy in schools	36%	39%	ns
Handling the TTB			
Change your teaching style	85%	86%	ns
Restrict the range of activities you do with pupils	43%	84%	20.58**
You moved to another school	12%	58%	11.24**
You changed the class you teach	9%	38%	6.09*
You have offered pupils removed from class	24%	69%	15.12**
You made the work easier	16%	4%	5.10*
You lowered your expectations on pupils	18%	6%	4.94*
You lowered your expectations in terms of behaviour	22%	4%	7.33*
TTB affect to the quality of teaching			
Made you dread lessons for professional safety	53%	56%	ns
Created a bad atmosphere in the class	52%	59%	ns
Lowered expectations of teaching as career	21%	23%	ns
Increased the amount of stress	54%	92%	19.48**
Reporting the TTB			
Colleague	61%	63%	ns
Head teacher	27%	65%	17.77**
Head	23%	57%	18.25**
Family member	8%	48%	19.94**
Consequences of reporting the TTB			
Nothing resolved	39%	32%	ns
Short term improvements	29%	35%	ns
Problem solved	32%	33%	ns
Made you feel incompetent dealing with problem	61%	18%	24.41**
No mechanism for staff supports in the school	49%	9%	16.11**
You have begun to accept TTB as a normal part of teaching	6%	4%	ns

Note: *p < .05; ** p < .001.