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**COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES'  
WAYS OF HANDLING SCHOOL BULLYING INCIDENTS**

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**Abstract**

The aim of the study was to compare the differences between teachers' and social pedagogues' ways of handling school bullying incidents. Quantitative descriptive research design was used and Estonian teachers (purposive sample, N=424) and social pedagogues (representative sample, N=177) completed the Handling Bullying Questionnaire (HBQ). The HBQ was used to measure how likely teachers and social pedagogues use five strategies (working with the bully, working with the victim, ignoring bullying, enlisting other adults, disciplining the bully) to handle school bullying incidents. Factor analysis and independent samples comparison revealed that teachers' and social pedagogues' strategies on responding to school bullying incidents differed on three of the five HBQ scale factor scores: (1) social pedagogues more often worked with the bully; (2) teachers more often ignored the bullying and (3) disciplined the bully. Teachers and social pedagogues used different strategies, whereas teachers tend to more ignore the bullying. This knowledge helps us to develop better bullying prevention and intervention to put emphasize on supporting teachers for using more effective strategies to collaboratively with non-teaching staff members deal with bullying in schools.

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## 1. Introduction

School bullying is a complex process of social interactions that has been a subject of research for decades (Escuadra et al., 2023; Smith, 2016; Zych et al., 2015). School bullying can be considered as a global social health problem that affects young people all over the world (Craig et al., 2009) and peer victimization is a risk for mental health, including suicide ideation among youth (Li et al., 2022; Van Geel et al., 2022). Exposure to bullying is not only a risk for learners, but also affects negatively teachers' mental health and has been related to higher levels of anxiety and depression (Woudstra et al., 2018).

Although, there are various definitions for bullying, Olweus' (1999) definition is widely used, which defines bullying using following criteria to characterize the form of aggressive behaviour: (1) intention to cause harm; (2) behaviour is repeated over time; (3) imbalance of power in relationship. School bullying is one of the most common expressions of aggression in the peer context during school years (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017) with the focus on social relationships (Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013). For decades, direct (visible attacks) and indirect (social isolation, exclusion) bullying is distinguished (Olweus, 1999), but with wider use of technology, cyberbullying is also a matter of research now (Smith, 2016).

Since much of the bullying occurs in schools, teachers, and other non-teaching staff members (e.g., social pedagogues, school counsellors, school psychologists, guidance counsellors) can be considered the key actors in prevention and intervention of school bullying (Bauman et al., 2021). Meta-analyses show that school anti-bullying interventions are effective in reducing overall bullying rates and helping to improve youth mental health, but the effect sizes are small (Fraguas et al., 2021). Therefore, larger effect sizes for school bullying interventions were associated with the presence of a number of intervention components, such as whole-school approach, anti-bullying policies, classroom rules, information for parents, informal peer involvement and work with victims (Gaffney et al., 2021). With adolescents, intervention trials should also consider the role of peer status and peer group norms which in adolescence might be the most relevant contextual moderators for intervention effects (Salmivalli et al., 2021). Decrease of general intervention across time was associated with higher odds of victimization and lower odds of being a defender (Burger et al., 2022). For the most victimized youth and especially for younger children, school-based interventions to reduce bullying can be considered generally effective (Hensums et al., 2022).

## 2. Problem Statement

Teachers play an important role in tackling school bullying and their responses to bullying need more research (Colpin et al., 2021). The non-teaching staff members (e.g. social pedagogues, school counsellors, school psychologists, guidance counsellors) also have a great responsibility in handling school bullying incidents but there are few studies in this area. There are various individual and contextual variables that influence teachers' response in bullying situations (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). In a scoping review, Gizzarelli et al. (2023) described individual (perceived self-efficacy, perceived seriousness of the bullying incident, sympathy or empathy for the target, teacher's gender, years of teaching, personal experiences with bullying, and orientation) and school factors (bullying prevention, training, school policies, and organisational characteristics) that influence school staff members' responses to bullying incidents. A recent systematic review by Van Aalst et al. (2022) concluded that teachers' likelihood to

intervene in bullying situations (which also affects the actual behaviour and intervention strategies) can be influenced by teachers' knowledge and understanding of bullying, attitudes toward bullying, perceived subjective norms, and self-efficacy. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of school bullying and how teachers and non-teaching staff members can address the issue effectively.

Although researchers generally share a common definition of bullying, a systematic review (Younan, 2019) of students of different ages and teachers reveals that when defining bullying all criteria may not be included. Qualitative research with preschool teachers revealed that although teachers described some of the characteristics of bullying (intention to harm, power imbalance, repetition), many of them had difficulties in differentiating between bullying and fighting (Ey & Campbell, 2022). Another qualitative study (using vignettes) elaborates that while "intention to harm" and "power imbalance" as criteria of bullying were relevant for teachers, repetition was not directly addressed and was highlighted by few of the teachers (Paljakka, 2023). Even though pre-service teachers acknowledge that bullying has harmful effects on students, they do not distinguish bullying from other types of unacceptable behaviours or have sufficient knowledge to understand the multi-faceted nature of bullying (Mahon et al., 2023).

In contrast, when defining bullying, social pedagogues acknowledge the combination of different components, multilevel concepts of bullying and characteristics of individuals who are engaged in bullying behaviour with emphasis on the bullying intervention and prevention (Kõiv & Aia-Utsal, 2019). Eriksen (2018) included school staff members as teachers, support staff (social workers, well-being officers, school nurse), and management and found, through interviews, that school staff members used a narrow definition of bullying as a rigid tool to decide whether and how to react towards incidents (Eriksen, 2018). According to Gizzarelli et al. (2023), school staff responses to student reports of bullying can be addressed to peers, bullying target, bullying perpetrator, school community, wider community or the last option is no response to bullying.

In addition to knowledge about understanding school bullying, individual, professional and contextual variables also influence teachers' response to school bullying. Previous research has found that teachers' intention to intervene in school bullying has been associated with teachers' autonomous motivation (Sutter et al., 2023) and job satisfaction (De Luca et al., 2019). When teachers attribute bullying to external causes which are not in their control, victimization rate among students was high (Oldenburg et al., 2015) and teachers who tend to act passively in bullying situations reported high levels of learned helplessness (Song et al., 2018). Also, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs about managing interpersonal relationships in school were positively associated with enlisting other adults and using authority-based interventions when handling school bullying incidents (Kollerová et al., 2021). Results from recent meta-analysis (Ten Bokkel et al., 2023) indicate that teachers can lower levels of school bullying and peer victimization by establishing high-quality affective teacher-student relationships. Teachers' affective empathy is a significant positive predictor of intervention for traditional bullying (Eldridge & Jenkins, 2020) and school counsellors felt more empathetic to victims of physical and verbal bullying, less for victims of relational bullying (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). Teachers who reported high empathy for victims, were more likely to intervene in relational bullying situation (Wolgast et al., 2022).

To measure how respondents might act in response to bullying scenario, The Handling Bullying Questionnaire (HBQ, Bauman et al., 2008) has been used consisting of five subscales: *Working with the*

*bully; Working with the victim; Enlisting other adults; Ignoring the bullying; and Disciplining the bully.* Previous studies using the HBQ indicate that teachers who had childhood experiences of being victims of bullying (compared to teachers with different experiences) would use more *Disciplining the bully* and *Enlisting other adults*, but not respond to victims (Yoon et al., 2016) and teachers with workplace bullying experience (compared with non-victimized teachers) tend to use more to *Discipline the bully* and *Work with the victim* (Kõiv, 2019). While teachers can be active or passive in terms of intervening in school bullying, teachers' active responses to bullying (e.g. authority-based interventions and intention to work with the bully) were positively associated with collaboration and communication among teachers in the school (Kollerová et al., 2021). Preparing teachers to deal with school bullying is necessary: teachers who had received anti-bullying training were more likely to use active strategies measured with the HBQ, compared to untrained teachers (Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011). Teachers' higher competence on bullying is directly associated with lower levels of school bullying and victimization (De Luca et al., 2019) and also teachers reported that they need training and professional development to deal with cyberbullying effectively (Fredrick et al., 2023).

When defining the origins of school bullying, pre-school teachers and psychologists' identification differed – teachers believe the most influential factor is the use of digital technologies and psychologists believe it to be the social and family environment of the aggressor (Fernández-Alfaraz et al., 2023). Teachers and school counsellors' intention to intervene in bullying situations was motivated by beliefs about the consequences of school bullying (Gagnon et al., 2022) and teachers who have a more negative attitude toward aggression tend to react more actively, measured with the HBQ (Grumm & Hein, 2013). It has been found that teachers and school counsellors' motives to intervene in bullying may differ: teachers' focus was more on preventing students' negative impacts on academic success and learning; alternatively, school counsellors focused more on positive psychosocial and interpersonal impacts like norms about behaving adequately with peers and developing appropriate interpersonal skills (Gagnon et al., 2022).

When comparing teachers and counsellors' ways of handling school bullying incidents as measured with the HBQ, previous research has found that counsellors had lower scores on ignoring the incident and disciplining the bully and tend more to work with the victim compared with teachers (Bauman et al., 2008). Also, guidance counsellors were likely to discipline the bully and enlist other adults as a strategy for handling school bullying incidents and therefore, were unlikely to ignore the bullying incident (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). When teachers were compared with education support professionals (e.g. paraeducators, clerical services, transportation, food and other services), teachers reported bullying as a significantly greater problem and felt more comfortable with intervening when different forms of school bullying occur (Bradshaw et al., 2013).

### **3. Research Question**

The research question that emerged is how teachers and social pedagogues' ways of handling bullying incidents among students may differ.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study is to compare the differences between teachers and social pedagogues' ways of handling school bullying incidents. It was hypothesized that social pedagogues would work more with the bullies and victims compared with teachers.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Sampling**

The overall sample consisted of Estonian teachers (N=424) and social pedagogues (N=177). The first sample of teachers was formed as a purposive sample, which comprised teachers from all over Estonia. First, from the list of all Estonian counties, half were selected, including counties from different regions in Estonia (representing both urban and rural areas, counties with high and low population density, islands); secondly, from selected counties, all schools representing three educational levels: primary school, lower secondary and upper secondary were identified (using the Estonian Education Information System); thirdly, all of the teachers from the selected schools were included in the first sample. The sample of teachers (N=424) consisted of 386 females (91.9%), 31 males (7.4%), 3 other (0.7%). Teachers were categorized in five age groups: up to 29 years old (8.7%), 30-39 years old (16.3%), 40-49 years old (25.9%), 50-59 years old (29.2%) and over 60 (19.8%). The mode age group for teachers was 50-59 years old.

The sample of social pedagogues was formed as a representative sample and included all the social pedagogues in Estonia. Social pedagogues were selected by listing all the schools in Estonia representing three educational levels: primary school, lower secondary and upper secondary (using the Estonian Education Information System) including also counselling centres and other institutions that provide social pedagogue services. The second sample of social pedagogues (N=177) consisted of 174 females (98.3%) and 3 other (1.7%). Social pedagogues were categorized in five age groups: up to 29 years old (6.8%), 30-39 years old (26.6%), 40-49 years old (32.8%), 50-59 years old (23.2%) and over 60 (10.7%). The mode age group for social pedagogues was 40-49 years old.

### **5.2. Instrument, data collection and data analysis**

The teachers and social pedagogues in the sample received the e-questionnaire through their personal e-mail addresses accessed in public webpages of all institutions.

Teachers and social pedagogues completed the Handling Bullying Questionnaire HBQ (Bauman et al., 2008). The HBQ consists of hypothetical bullying scenarios with elements of direct and indirect bullying, and 22 items describing how respondents might respond with five-point Likert scale from 1 ("I definitely would not") to 5 ("I definitely would") response options. The HBQ consists of five subscales: 1) working with the victim (4 items); 2) working with the bully (5 items); 3) ignoring the bullying (5 items); 4) enlisting other adults (5 items); and 5) disciplining the bully (3 items). The Estonian version of the HBQ (adapted among teachers by Kõiv, 2019) follows the five-factor structure of English version and can be considered adequate.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis were used to examine the factor structure of the HBQ in the total sample of the present study. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. and the confirmatory factor analysis (principal component analysis, varimax rotation) was performed before conducting data analyses to examine the factor structure and to assure construct validity of the HBQ scales in the total sample (N=601). Factor analysis revealed a five factor structure which explains 51.5% of the variance; most items had strong loading on one factor and the internal consistency of the factors in the five-factor model ranged from unacceptable to very good. The scales describe strategies respondents used to handle school bullying incidents and include: (1) *Working with the bully* (16.1% of variance, factor rotated loadings ranged between 0.466-0.665; scale reliability Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.714$ , the mean scores for the subscale of total sample M=4.11, SD=0.57); (2) *Working with the victim* (11.7% of variance, factor rotated loadings ranged between 0.427-0.792; scale reliability Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.736$ , the mean scores for the subscale of total sample M=3.37, SD=0.83); (3) *Enlisting other adults* (8.1% of variance, factor rotated loadings ranged between 0.154-0.757; scale reliability Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.574$ , the mean scores for the subscale of total sample M=4.00, SD=0.58); (4) *Ignoring the bullying* (7.5% of variance, factor rotated loadings ranged between 0.271-0.704; scale reliability Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.480$ , the mean scores for the subscale of total sample M=1.75, SD=0.51); and (5) *Disciplining the bully* (8.1% of variance, factor rotated loadings ranged between 0.543-0.737; scale reliability Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.447$ , the mean scores for the subscale of total sample M=4.31, SD=0.59).

All items were included in the data analysis with due consideration for the results of confirmatory factor analysis. The independent samples t-test was used to compare differences between teachers and social pedagogues' ways of handling school bullying incidents as reflected by the five subscales of the HBQ.

The following research ethics principles were applied in this research: all teachers and social pedagogues participated on a voluntary basis; they were informed about the aim and scope of the study; and the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants was assured.

## 6. Findings

The findings from the current study revealed that respondents' strategies in responding to school bullying incidents differed on three of the five HBQ subscales: *Working with the bully*, *Ignoring the bullying*, and *Disciplining the bully*. The comparison of the two groups (teachers and social pedagogues) and scores of the subscales of the HBQ are represented in Table 1.

High mean scores were reported by teachers on following subscales: *Disciplining the bully*, *Enlisting other adults*, and *Working with the bully*; and by social pedagogues: *Working with the bully* and *Disciplining the bully*. Subscales *Working with the victim* and *Enlisting other adults* received similar mean values reported by both teachers and social pedagogues with no statistically significant differences found.

**Table 1.** Mean scores, standard deviations and t-test results of the HBQ scales of two groups

Subscale	Teachers <i>M (SD)</i>	Social pedagogues <i>M (SD)</i>	p-value	t-value
Working with the bully	4.00 (0.59)	4.36 (0.44)	<0.01**	7.29
Working with the victim	3.39 (0.83)	3.35 (0.82)	0.81	0.47
Enlisting other adults	4.03 (0.57)	3.95 (0.61)	0.15	1.45
Ignoring the bullying	1.87 (0.50)	1.45 (0.39)	<0.01**	9.79
Disciplining the bully	4.40 (0.56)	4.12 (0.64)	<0.01**	4.88

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Three subscales emerged where teachers and social pedagogues' ways of handling school bullying incidents differed.

### 6.1. Working with the bully

According to the data analysis, more social pedagogues reported the subscale *Working with the bully* compared with teachers. Therefore, more social pedagogues compared with teachers would include strategies like discussions with bully/bullies to share their concerns and ask them to help to improve the situation; seek to get the bully to behave in a more caring and responsible manner; help the bully to achieve greater self-esteem or find alternative activities for the bully. *Working with the bully* was the most used strategy for handling school bullying incidents as reported by social pedagogues.

### 6.2. Ignoring the bullying

Teachers reported higher mean scores on the subscale *Ignoring the bullying* compared with social pedagogues. Ignoring the bullying means treating the matter lightly; leaving it for someone else/students themselves to sort it out; telling the kids to "grow up" and ignoring the bullying incident completely. *Ignoring the bullying* was reported being least used strategy for both teachers and social pedagogues and this subscale received the lowest mean scores.

### 6.3. Disciplining the bully

Teachers also reported disciplining the bully as a subscale more compared to social pedagogues. *Disciplining the bully* scale consist claims that adults would insist the bully "cut it out"; making it clear to the bully that his/her behaviour would not be tolerated and making sure the bully was suitably punished. *Disciplining the bully* was strategy reported the most popular choice among teachers.

## 7. Conclusions

Teachers' ways of dealing with school bullying has been a research subject for many years, whereas among school staff members the research done is relatively limited and this stimulates new research questions. Since previous studies have found that there were differences in defining (social pedagogues focus more on prevention and intervention of bullying, e.g., Kõiv & Aia-Utsal, 2019) bullying and dealing (teachers' motivation to intervene in school bullying focused more on the group and school counsellors on

the individual, e.g. Gagnon et al., 2022) with school bullying among teachers and school staff members', it was hypothesized that social pedagogues would work more with the bullies and victims compared with teachers. This hypothesis was partially confirmed.

The results suggest that teachers' and social pedagogues' strategies on responding to school bullying incidents differed on three of the five HBQ subscale scores: *Working with the bully*, *Ignoring the bullying*, and *Disciplining the bully*. Therefore, the most reported strategy for teachers was *Disciplining the bully* and *Working with the bully* for social pedagogues.

The results indicate that social pedagogues would use the strategy *Work with the bully* more compared to teachers. Social pedagogues compared to teachers would more use strategies that give responsibility in dealing with bullying situations to the bullies as well. It has been found previously that 44.1% of teachers use the strategy *Work with the bully* in intervening to school bullying incidents which was the second popular strategy for teachers measured with the HBQ (Burger et al., 2015). Also, long service teachers (over 20 years of work experience) use the strategy *Work with the bully* more compared with teachers who have worked less than 10 years (Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011). Findings from the current study report *Work with the bully* as the most popular strategy for social pedagogues and third choice for teachers in handling school bullying incidents.

The second scale that found statistically significant differences between teachers and social pedagogues was *Ignoring the bullying*, whereas teachers reported the use of strategy more often while social pedagogues would ignore the incident less. However, it was the least used strategy for both teachers and social pedagogues in handling bullying incidents. In addition, teachers had higher mean scores on *Ignoring the bullying* compared to school counsellors, who used the strategy less (Bauman et al., 2008) and this was also the strategy used least as reported by guidance counsellors who were unlikely to ignore the bullying incident (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). Teachers with workplace victimization experience were less likely to *Ignore the bullying* incidents compared with teachers who did not have such experience (Kõiv, 2019). Yet ignoring the bullying seems to be a complicated matter since in the self-reported intervention strategy of responding to school bullying, 0% of teachers reported ignoring the incident according to Burger et al. (2015). On the other hand, from the students' perspective, teachers did not intervene and ignored/dismissed the bullying in one in six bullying situations (Wachs et al., 2019). Although many teachers may not intervene or ignore the bullying due to lack of specific inclusive education practices (D'Urso et al., 2022), non-intervention of teachers in bullying situations increases the likelihood of victimization and decreases the likelihood of being a defender (Burger et al., 2022). Despite different data about prevalence of ignoring the bullying, it is important to acknowledge its impact on students. Even though, school staff might not have sufficient skills or knowledge in handling bullying incident, ignoring the bullying can put students in a difficult position, since students generally perceive teachers to be effective in intervening in bullying (Wachs et al., 2019). It has been found that teachers who were not trained with antibullying interventions would more likely ignore the incident (Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011).

The third scale where statistically significant differences were found between teachers and social pedagogues included *Disciplining the bully*, where teachers reported disciplining the bully more often as a strategy in handling school bullying incidents compared to social pedagogues. It was the most popular choice for teachers and second choice for social pedagogues. This is in line with earlier research where



teachers compared to school counsellors had higher scores on *Disciplining the bully* (Bauman et al., 2008), and guidance counsellors would endorse *Discipline the bully* as well (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). Previous studies have yielded different data: from 46% of teachers reported *Disciplining the bully* (Yoon et al., 2016) to 82% of the teachers who used the strategy to respond to school bullying incidents and used authority-based interventions which demand obedience to authority and focus on externally forced control (Burger et al., 2015). On the other hand, there has been research that found that when teachers were less likely to discipline the bully and show more interpersonal behaviours with high levels of control and closeness, lower levels of bullying and victimization were established (Van Der Zanden et al., 2015). Teachers who perceived their school climate as hostile, used the strategy twice as often compared with teachers who did not (Yoon et al., 2016). Therefore, disciplinary methods could be punitive, which focus on confronting the bully and insisting behavioural change, or non-punitive, which focus on a positive approach (e.g. increasing empathy for victims) (Hensums et al., 2022). Disciplinary sanctions (clearly communicating to the bully that the behaviour was unacceptable; reporting to other adults) was the most effective intervention strategy, therefore low to moderate severity measures were used, and severe measures like detention, suspension and expulsion were excluded (Burger et al., 2022). Also, it is important to note the severity of bullying incident and in the HBQ the scenario given is categorised as moderate level of severity and include elements of both direct and indirect bullying (Bauman et al., 2008). It is found that teachers were more likely to intervene in overt bullying incidents (compared with covert) and tended to focus on the bully as well as ensuring that the bully was suitably punished (Byers et al., 2011).

While *Enlisting other adults* was the second most popular subscale in handling school bullying incidents and third choice for social pedagogues, there were no significant differences between two groups. It has been found that 40.8% of teachers would enlist other adults (Burger et al., 2015) and guidance counsellors were also likely to enlist other adults (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). What is more, lower levels of victimization were established when teachers enlist other adults to handle bullying (Van Der Zanden et al., 2015). In a common school setting where social pedagogues and teachers work together, the social pedagogue may be the *other adult* invoked by teachers to intervene in bullying situations.

*Work with the victim* was the second least used strategy for both teachers and social pedagogues, for which did not yield statistically significant differences. Previously it was stated that 26.7% of teachers would work with the victim (Burger et al., 2015) and school counsellors had higher scores for *Working with the victim* compared to teachers (Bauman et al., 2008).

To conclude, teacher and social pedagogues differ in strategies they use to handle school bullying incidents, whereas teachers report more *Disciplining the bully*, *Ignoring the bullying* and social pedagogues report more of *Working with the bully*. The different strategies that teachers use to handle bullying correlate with their attitudes and beliefs toward aggression and its changeability (Grumm & Hein, 2013). When the bullying has occurred, school psychologists can support teachers to develop effective strategies to intervene (Van Der Zanden et al., 2015). This role can be expanded to all support specialists in schools. Different social and emotional competencies protect children and adolescents against bullying and cyberbullying (Zych et al., 2019). Since positive school climate is a protective factor related to lower involvement in any bullying role (Zych et al., 2019), teachers and social pedagogues can contribute a lot in creating a safe learning environment. In dealing with bullying, both the short and long term, supportive-cooperative

intervention strategies have been found to be the most successful (Wachs et al., 2019). There is a need for training which provides both teachers and support staff members' sufficient knowledge and skills to handle school bullying effectively. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers and other school support staff members work collaboratively in creating a safe learning environment by preventing and intervening efficaciously in school bullying.

## Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

## Declaration of Conflicts Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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