

Predictors and Forms of Intervention in Peer Bullying: Pre-service Teachers vs. Teachers

Abstract

Research shows that teachers' perceptions of peer bullying (PB) are an important predictor of their intervention. Therefore, the aims of the study were to find out i) how serious pre-service teachers and teachers find different types of PB, ii) how empathic to the victims and willing to intervene they are, iii) what predicts interventions in both groups and iv) what forms of intervention pre-service teachers and teachers would use regarding victims and perpetrators. Results suggest that teachers perceive all types of PB as more severe than pre-service teachers and are more willing to intervene earlier, but pre-service teachers show more empathy for the victims. The strongest predictor of intervention in both groups is beliefs about the severity of bullying, but their forms of intervention differ significantly. Implications of the study findings are also discussed.

Keywords: *peer bullying, types of bullying, pre-service teachers, teachers, intervention*

Introduction

Peer bullying is a problem present in schools worldwide and encountered by students and teachers on a daily basis. It can be manifested in a variety of ways - as physical bullying (e.g., pushing, kicking, damaging the property of others), relational bullying (manipulating with peers - social exclusion or injuring the reputation of peers), as well as verbal harassment or intimidation (e.g. name-

calling, threats and other verbal humiliation). PB has a negative impact on the physical and mental health of students (Chen, Liu & Cheng, 2012; Flemming & Jacobsen, 2009; Pečjak, 2014), thus researchers are trying to understand the nature of PB and minimise its negative impact on students through prevention and intervention.

In school setting, the teacher is the person who has the biggest potential power to stop violence. Research shows that teachers rarely notice bullying and even less frequently intervene in bullying situations. In a study by Olweus (1993), 40% of younger and as many as 65% of older primary school students stated that teachers “almost never” try to stop PB. It is therefore very important to find out which are the predictors of teachers’ sensitivity to detect and willingness to intervene in the cases of PB.

Bradshaw, Sawyer & O’Brennan (2007) found out that the level of teacher sensitivity to PB situations depends on their own experience with bullying, which influences their beliefs about bullying, and on their perceived competence for coping with these situations. This finding has important practical implications. Keeping teachers aware of the negative consequences of PB has an effect on increasing their sensitivity to PB. Moreover, if teachers are trained in using strategies for confronting PB situations, the likelihood of their responding to and stopping violent behaviour increases (Sullivan, 2011).

Sensitisation to “zero tolerance” for PB and more immediate response to it must become an important part of teacher education programs and has to play a significant role in professional development of practising teachers as well. These facts can be supported by Korthagen’s model of teacher professional development (2004). It is stated there that teachers’ school environment, their perceived competence for coping with bullying and their beliefs about PB influence their behaviour the most. Consequently, teachers’ response to PB depends on the school’s policy concerning bullying. For instance, if there are clear rules of no tolerance for PB and it is reacted to at once, more teachers will respond earlier to bullying situations. Teacher beliefs about the severity of PB and about the consequences of bullying for students also have a great influence on whether teachers will respond to bullying or not. For example, if a teacher is convinced that PB is a normal developmental phase or that a student will not become a victim if he/she avoids violent peers, then such a teacher will react to PB later or not at all. Regarding the feeling of competence, it is very important to empower the teacher to cope with bullying. Therefore, in the course of study, future teachers are expected to form beliefs that PB is unacceptable in the school environment and learn how to cope with this violence.

Perceived severity of PB

Before designing any kind of prevention or intervention programs, teacher beliefs about the seriousness of PB have to be investigated. Thus, we were interested in possible differences between undergraduate students in teacher education programs and elementary school teachers concerning the perceived severity of PB.

Research showed that teachers perceived various types of PB differently. They perceived physical bullying as more serious than verbal and the latter more serious than relational bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Craig, Bell & Leschied, 2011; Holt & Keyes, 2004; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). The same research also showed that teacher perceptions concerning the seriousness of PB situations were an important predictor of their intervention. Yoon & Kerber (2003) report that teachers show significantly less empathy for the victims of relational bullying than for the victims of the other two types of bullying and are consequently less prepared to intervene in situations of relational bullying. Teachers tend to let students settle relational issues by themselves and are willing to intervene 5-times more frequently in situations of verbal and physical bullying. They show more empathy for the victims of verbal and physical bullying as well. Ellis & Schute (2007) noticed that teachers use the strategy of problem solving and punishment more often when they estimate a situation of bullying as more serious. Therefore, the likelihood of teacher involvement varied as a function of the perceived seriousness of PB.

Research Problem

The aim of the study was to find out:

1. How sensitive pre-service teachers and teachers are to PB. The question was if there were any differences among pre-service teachers and teachers in (a) their perceptions of different types of PB – physical, verbal and relational, (b) how much empathy they show for victims of each type of PB and (c) how willing they are to intervene in bullying situations;
2. The predictors of intervention in bullying situations by pre-service teachers and teachers;
3. The differences between pre-service teachers and teachers in their forms of possible intervention towards perpetrators and victims regarding the type of PB.

Research Methodology

Research Sample

A total of 192 undergraduate students in teacher education programs (pre-service teachers) and 70 elementary school teachers from six Slovene schools participated in the study. The sample of pre-service teachers and teachers was matched by course of study/teaching (science: 31% pre-service teachers vs. 34% teachers; social studies: 21% pre-service teachers vs. 34% teachers; primary teacher education: 48% pre-service teachers vs. 32% teachers ($X^2(1) = .065$) and gender ($X^2(1) = .165$).

Instruments and Procedures

A modified version of The Bullying Attitude Questionnaire (Yoon and Kerber, 2003) was used in our study. It consists of six descriptions of school PB situations – two situations of physical bullying, two of verbal bullying and two of relational bullying. The participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate: (a) the perceived severity of PB (1 – not at all serious; 5 – very serious; Cronbach's $\alpha = .61$), (b) empathy for the victim (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$) and (c) the likelihood of intervention (1 – not at all likely; 5 – very likely; Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). After completing the first part of the questionnaire, the participants who expressed willingness to intervene, answered two questions about their response to the perpetrator and the victim.

Data were collected in March and April 2014. Pre-service teachers filled in the questionnaires during their study courses and teachers at home.

Data Analysis

One-way ANOVA was used to determine the differences between pre-service teachers and teachers; Cohen's d coefficient was used to calculate the effect sizes and hierarchical regression analysis to estimate the readiness of pre-service teachers and teachers to intervene. Content categories qualitative analysis was used to process the responses to open-ended questions about dealing with the perpetrator (Yoon & Kerber, 2003) and with the victim (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006), respectively.

Results and discussion

Perceptions of PB by pre-service teachers and teachers

The first aim of the study was to find out how pre-service teachers and teachers perceived different types of PB – physical, verbal and relational, and to detect possible differences between these two groups (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in the perception of PB between pre-service teachers and teachers (ANOVA)

| Item | Pre-service teacher <i>M (SD)</i> | Teacher <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>F</i> (<i>df</i> =1) | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|----------|
| Seriousness of bullying | | | | | |
| - verbal | 4.38 (0.92) | 4.60 (0.86) | 12.933 | .000*** | .25 |
| - physical | 4.41 (1.20) | 4.61 (0.91) | 5.834 | .016* | .19 |
| - relational | 3.47 (1.33) | 3.69 (1.56) | 5.211 | .023* | .15 |
| Empathy for victim | | | | | |
| - verbal | 4.30 (1.52) | 3.90 (1.97) | 11.752 | .001** | .23 |
| - physical | 4.21 (1.57) | 3.96 (1.54) | 5.328 | .022* | .16 |
| - relational | 3.88 (1.56) | 3.64 (1.64) | 4.715 | .031* | .15 |
| Need for intervention | | | | | |
| - verbal | 4.69 (0.83) | 4.86 (0.54) | 10.997 | .001** | .25 |
| - physical | 4.64 (1.11) | 4.79 (0.69) | 4.768 | .030* | .17 |
| - relational | 3.76 (1.64) | 4.18 (1.28) | 13.836 | .000*** | .29 |

Note: *N* = 192 pre-service teachers, *N* = 70 teachers; *p* < .05*; *p* < .01**; *p* < .001***; *d* – effect sizes (Cohen's *d*)

We found some common features of pre-service teachers and teachers. Both groups perceived physical bullying as the most serious and relational bullying as the least serious; both showed the least empathy for the victims of relational bullying and were the least willing to intervene in this type of bullying. Both, pre-service teachers and teachers were more willing to intervene in the cases of physical and verbal bullying. These results were expected and were similar to the results of other studies (Bauman & DelRio, 2006; Kochenderdfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). However, our findings are also alarming, considering the serious harmful effects of relational bullying on the victims and the bullies as well. Despite the fact that experts recognize all the types of bullying as equally serious, teachers often ignore this type of bullying.

Teachers might have difficulties in perceiving relational bullying because it is relatively unclear. Namely, policies against physical bullying in many schools involve the so-called “zero tolerance” for violence. This kind of atmosphere creates an environment in which teachers feel an obligation to intervene. It is similar in the case of verbal bullying. Most schools have rules which define those behaviours as unacceptable. Relational bullying, on the other hand, is more ambiguous and may be difficult to detect (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). At the same time, it is very hard for the teacher to determine the level of how affected and hurt the victim is, when, e.g., he/she is excluded from the group of peers playing. Some authors (Vernberg & Gamm, 2003; Yoon & Kerber, 2003) also warn against the existence of teachers’ beliefs that relational bullying is a normative behaviour, particularly in the middle school, which decreases the possibility for them to intervene. It is therefore very important that pre-service teachers during their course of study and teachers through their professional development become aware that all the types of PB have to be treated as equally serious.

There are significant differences in all measured variables between pre-service teachers and teachers. Teachers perceive all types of bullying as more severe than pre-service teachers and are more willing to intervene earlier. Pre-service teachers, however, show more empathy for the victims of all types of PB than teachers, which could partially be explained by idealism on the part of pre-service teachers. Yet, the effect sizes of the differences are small. We found the largest differences between pre-service teachers and teachers in verbal and relational bullying. Teachers consider verbal bullying significantly more severe than pre-service teachers do and are willing to intervene earlier. In relational bullying, teachers are again willing to intervene earlier than pre-service teachers.

Predictors for intervention and forms of intervention by pre-service teachers and teachers

Further, we were interested in the factors which predict pre-service teachers’ and teachers’ intervention in different types of PB. We also aimed to determine possible differences in the forms of their intervention towards perpetrators and victims, regarding the type of PB.

The results of hierarchical regression analysis are presented in Table 2 (for pre-service teachers) and Table 3 (for teachers).

Table 2 shows that 39% of variability in the pre-service teachers’ interventions in verbal bullying, 50% variability in physical and 52% variability in relational bullying could be explained by included variables. The strongest predictor of intervention by the pre-service teachers is their beliefs about the seriousness of violence

(standardized β coefficients range between .39 and .52). An important predictor is also their course of study. The students of social sciences are significantly more sensitive to physical and relational bullying than students of science. The students of social sciences show more empathy for the victims as well and are consequently more willing to intervene. The reason might be in the prosocial orientation of those students, which also led them to choose the social science course of study in the first place.

Table 2. Predictors of pre-service teachers' intervention

| Pre-service teachers | | Type of bullying | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|----------|------------|
| | | verbal | physical | relational |
| | | β | β | β |
| 1. step | gender | -.03 | -.07 | .12* |
| | study course | .13 | .29*** | .15* |
| | R/R^2 | .43/.19 | .42/.18 | .47/.22 |
| | ΔR | .19*** | .18*** | .22*** |
| 2. step | seriousness | .39*** | .52*** | .48*** |
| | empathy for victims | .21** | .13* | .18** |
| | R/R^2 | .62/.39 | .71/.50 | .72/.52 |
| | ΔR | .20*** | .32*** | .32*** |

Note. $N = 192$ pre-service teachers; $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$; β – standardized β coefficient; R – multiple correlation coefficient, R^2 – determinant coefficient; ΔR – multiple correlation coefficient change.

Table 3. Predictors of teachers' intervention

| Teachers | | Type of bullying | | |
|----------|---------------------|------------------|----------|------------|
| | | verbal | physical | relational |
| | | β | β | β |
| 1. step | gender | -.16 | -.11 | .07 |
| | course of teaching | .32 | .23 | .24 |
| | years of teaching | .14 | .21* | .20* |
| | R/R^2 | .26/.07 | .38/.14 | .40/.16 |
| | ΔR | .07 | .14* | .16* |
| 2. step | seriousness | .25* | .57*** | .46*** |
| | empathy for victims | .18 | .04 | .23* |
| | R/R^2 | .40/.16 | .67/.45 | .70/.49 |
| | ΔR | .09* | .31*** | .33*** |

Note: $N = 70$ teachers; $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$; β – standardized β coefficient; R – multiple correlation coefficient, R^2 – determinant coefficient; ΔR – multiple correlation coefficient change.

Only 16% of variability in teacher interventions in verbal bullying could be explained by the variables in the model. Nevertheless, a significantly larger amount of variability in teacher interventions could be explained regarding physical (45%) and relational (49%) bullying. The strongest predictor of all types of school bullying in the teachers is the same as in the group of pre-service teachers, namely their beliefs about the seriousness of violence. The more serious they find the bullying situation, the more ready they are to intervene. The teachers also assess physical and relational bullying as more serious than the pre-service teachers do. Another important predictor is the years of teaching. More experienced teachers are more sensitive to physical and relational bullying than those with less experience. It is possible that younger teachers are more focused on the didactic aspects of curriculum (e.g., covering the entire lesson's content) than on student behaviour (and PB). Therefore, they might overlook individual cases of PB.

Considering the fact that only a few studies were conducted on teachers' ways of handling perpetrators and victims from the point of view of their beliefs about bullying (Kochenderfer & Pelletier, 2008; Troop & Ladd, 2002; Yoon & Kerber, 2003), we wanted to respond to these issues in our study.

Table 4. Action toward bullies by pre-service teachers and teachers

| Categories | Percentage of rating in each category | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | verbal | | physical | | relational | |
| | pre-serv. teachers | teachers | pre-serv. teachers | teachers | pre-serv. teachers | teachers |
| No intervention | 0.4 | 0.0 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 1.7 | 0.0 |
| Discussion with participants | 26.1 | 29.0 | 31.2 | 31.8 | 53.0 | 54.7 |
| Discuss rules with whole class | 0.0 | 1.5 | 4.4 | 1.5 | 3.4 | 9.4 |
| Indicate behaviour as intolerable | 29.3 | 11.6 | 21.6 | 21.6 | 28.7 | 12.5 |
| Discipline bullying behaviours | 13.8 | 10.1 | 18.1 | 28.8 | 8.0 | 14.1 |
| Report to higher authority; inform parent | 30.4 | 47.8 | 21.6 | 27.3 | 0.5 | 6.2 |
| Other | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.7 | 0.0 | 4.7 | 3.1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Note: Other – responses that did not fit into Yoon and Kerber's categories.

The most frequent reaction of the pre-service teachers and teachers to verbal bullying was to report to higher authority – talking to the principal and/or the parents of the bully. In physical and relational bullying, participants from both groups would most often try to find peer resolution.

There are, however, significant differences in responses to all the types of PB between both groups (for verbal bullying $\chi^2 (6) = 12.715, p < .023$; for physical bullying $\chi^2 (5) = 18.428, p < .002$; for relational bullying $\chi^2 (6) = 27.471, p < .000$). Hence, in verbal bullying, the pre-service teachers would indicate that the bully’s behaviour is intolerable earlier than the teachers. On the other hand, in physical bullying, the teachers would discipline bullying behaviour or send the bully to the principal or contact his/her parents, significantly more often than the pre-service teachers. They would act similarly in relational bullying with the addition of trying to discuss the issue with the participants (perpetrator and victim). In relational bullying, the pre-service teachers would confront the perpetrator and discuss their intolerable behaviour significantly more often than the teachers would.

Table 5. Action toward victims by pre-service teachers and teachers

| categories | Percentage of rating in each category | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | verbal | | physical | | relational | |
| | pre-serv. teachers | teachers | pre-serv. teachers | teachers | pre-serv. teachers | teachers |
| No intervention | 3.2 | 1.5 | 2.4 | 0.0 | 5.8 | 2.6 |
| Discussion with participants | 50.0 | 50.0 | 50.4 | 57.6 | 42.7 | 51.3 |
| Discussion with whole class | 0.5 | 1.5 | 0.3 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 7.0 |
| Ineffective advocate* | 5.4 | 1.5 | 3.3 | 15.0 | 15.0 | 7.8 |
| Support, encourage the victim | 27.1 | 19.7 | 28.3 | 22.9 | 25.3 | 27.0 |
| Report to higher authority; inform parent | 9.4 | 22.8 | 6.3 | 9.2 | 0.8 | 3.5 |
| Other | 4.4 | 3.0 | 8.3 | 2.5 | 7.8 | 0.9 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Note: * Tell victim to ‘suck it up’ or ignore bullying (Don’t let them bother you.); Other – responses that did not fit into Yoon and Kerber’s categories.

The pre-service teachers’ and teachers’ most frequent responses in all types of bullying were discussion with both participants (bully and victim) – they wanted the students to communicate with each other and find a solution – and active

support for the victim. This combination of coping strategies - talking with the bullies and the victims and active support for the victims, appears to be related to lower levels of PB in classrooms (Kochenderfer & Pelletier, 2008).

Yet, we found significant differences in handling the victims in all types of PB between the pre-service teachers and the teachers (for verbal bullying $\chi^2(6) = 17.672, p < .013$; for physical bullying $\chi^2(6) = 15.798, p < .016$; for relational bullying $\chi^2(6) = 17.615, p < .012$). In situations of verbal and physical bullying, the pre-service teachers would comfort, support and encourage the victim significantly more often than the teachers would. However, the teachers would include the principal or parents in resolving the bullying situation or become an ineffective advocate of the victim significantly more often than the pre-service teachers would. In relational bullying, the pre-service teachers would become an ineffective advocate of the victim (say to the student to accept or ignore the violence) significantly more often than the teachers would. The teachers, on the other hand, would most frequently respond to these situations by finding peer resolution, which is not an optimum strategy. Victimized children would benefit the most from discussing their experience with their teacher and setting up proactive plans that reduce the risk of repeated bullying (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

There are different patterns of responding to PB in the pre-service teachers and teachers, even if the type of bullying is not taken into account. In larger part, the pre-service teachers would discuss the inappropriate behaviour with the perpetrators (e.g., only warning them about inappropriate behaviour); the teachers would choose more active ways to solve the problem - from disciplining the bully (immediately taken away - time out, punishment) to including the principal and the parents in resolving the bullying situation. We can recognize two patterns of dealing with the victims as well. The pre-service teachers would become an effective advocate of the victim in all types of PB; the teachers, on the other hand, would discuss the possibility of the victim facing the perpetrator and would include an authority (principal, parent).

Conclusions

It is very important to raise awareness about the severity of PB in pre-service teachers and teachers, especially regarding long-term harmful consequences for all students (not only for the bullies and the victims, but also for bystanders). Experts recognize all types of bullying as serious, thus they all require attention. It has to be emphasized in pre-service teacher education and teachers' professional

development that the absence of the teacher's consistent and effective disciplinary responses to bullying is most likely reinforcing it.

At the same time, it is necessary to expose and modify the non-functional beliefs of pre-service teachers and teachers, e.g., that bullying behaviour helps students learn social norms (normative beliefs) or that students will not be bullied if they stand up for themselves (assertive beliefs) (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). The results of their study suggest that teachers' inappropriate beliefs are reflected in their perceptions of PB as less severe and in their less effective response to bullying.

Besides modifying the non-functional teacher beliefs, the pre-service teachers and teachers have to be instructed on how to use different strategies to cope with bullying and develop their competences to cope with PB more actively (handling the perpetrators and the victims). Namely, the teachers were more likely to intervene in bullying situations when they felt greater self-efficacy in dealing with PB (Yoon, 2004). This is important because teachers who intervene appropriately provide students with a safe environment that makes bullying of all types unacceptable (Doll, Song & Siemens, 2004). By denying or ignoring PB, teachers demonstrate to students that school is not a safe place and that PB is a problem of individuals – the bully and the victim, not the school community, which is not true.

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