Teachers' Responses to Bullying: Unravelling Their Consequences and Antecedents: Introduction to the Special Issue

Hilde Colpin[a]*, Sheri Bauman[b] and Ersilia Menesini[c]

[a]*School Psychology and Development in Context Research Unit, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium;*
[b]*Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies, College of Education, University of Arizona, US;*
[c]*Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology, University of Florence, Italy*

*Corresponding author: Hilde Colpin, School Psychology and Development in Context, KU Leuven, Tiensestraat 102 box 3717, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. E-mail can be sent to hilde.colpin@kuleuven.be.

Abstract

Bullying among students is prevalent problem in schools and is difficult to eradicate. Teachers can play a key role in preventing and reducing peer bullying by adequately intervening in bullying incidents. However, and surprisingly, theory and research regarding teachers' responses to bullying are scarce to date. This special issue contributes to filling this gap by presenting ten original studies involving nine European countries and the US. This introduction gives an overview of literature about the conceptualization and measurement, the consequences, antecedents, and malleability of teacher responses to bullying, identifies limitations in the current research, and introduces the studies in this issue addressing these limitations.

Keywords: bullying; victimization; teacher responses

Teachers' Responses to Bullying: Unravelling Their Consequences and Antecedents

Bullying is a widespread and persistent problem in schools. In a large-scale study in Europe and Canada one in ten students reported having been bullied weekly in the past couple of months (Inchley et al., 2020). Bullying is commonly defined as repeated and intentional aggression towards others who have difficulty defending themselves (Olweus, 1994; Olweus, 2013). In this definition, three characteristics of bullying are highlighted: it is intentional, goal-directed aggression, it occurs repeatedly, and it is characterized by an imbalance of power, making it difficult for victims to defend themselves. Recently, scholars have emphasized the power imbalance as the main feature distinguishing bullying from other types of aggression (e.g., Menesini, 2019; Volk et al., 2017). Bullying can be conducted in different ways, such as physical aggression (e.g., hitting, fighting), verbal attacks (e.g., insulting, name calling), relational aggression (e.g., exclusion, gossiping) or cyberaggression (e.g., posting verbal offences or embarrassing pictures on social media) (e.g., Menesini, 2019). Victimization by bullying is associated with numerous negative outcomes in the short and long run, such as school drop-out, internalizing and externalizing problems, low self-esteem, self-harm, suicide ideation and attempts; it also incurs major costs for society (e.g., Arseneault, 2018; Moore et al., 2017; Schoeler et al., 2018). For instance, Wolke et al. (2013) found negative longitudinal effects of victimization in primary school on psychological and physical health, educational and financial accomplishments, and social relationships in adulthood, even when controlling for childhood hardship and psychiatric problems. Victimization in schools is a major concern for educators, health professionals and policy makers, because of these detrimental social-emotional consequences and because victimized students are being denied the right to a safe environment and realizing their full academic potential (Downes & Cefai, 2016; Olweus, 2013). In addition, victimization undermines the social

climate, and studies have shown negative effects on perpetrators and bystanders as well (e.g., Midgett & Doumas, 2019).

Teachers, as socialization agents and key adults in the classroom, have the potential to play a crucial role in bullying prevention and intervention (e.g., Brendgen & Troop-Gordon, 2015; Wachs et al., 2019; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). They are responsible for the instructional and emotional class climate, and students expect them to intervene and help them solve their problems (e.g., Rigby, 2014). However, research in different countries suggests that teachers are often not well-prepared for that task (e.g., Yoon et al., 2020). In a study in the Netherlands, primary school teachers gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and often did not recognize self-reported victims in their class (Oldenburg et al., 2016). A German study found that, according to adolescents, almost one third of bullying incidents are unnoticed by teachers (Wachs et al., 2019). In addition, even though a lot of teachers perceive victimization as a serious problem, many of them lack strategies and feel insecure about how to deal with it (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Further, children are often reluctant to tell teachers about peer victimization, because they expect that telling will not reduce the bullying or even make it worse (Fekkes et al., 2005). These fears may not be unfounded: when told, teachers often do not intervene, sometimes intentionally neglect the message, or respond by providing well-intentioned but deleterious advice (e.g., Troop-Gordon, 2015; Yoon et al., 2020). A study in the United Kingdom demonstrated that only 56% of victimized students who disclosed to their teacher, were positive about the outcome (Iurino, 2020).

Surprisingly, with a few exceptions, scholars only recently have become interested in the role of teachers in student bullying (e.g., Brendgen & Troop-Gordon, 2015; Yoon et al., 2020). Referring to a conceptual model by Gest and Rodkin (2011),

teachers can impact bullying and victimization by their daily classroom and individual interactions with their students, as well as through their peer network-oriented practices, i.e., specific strategies aimed at impacting peer relationships. This special issue aims to contribute to this emerging research domain by focusing on one type of peer network-oriented practices, i.e., teachers' responses to student bullying. Theory and research focusing on teacher responses to bullying, to date, is rather scarce. Several gaps can be identified regarding the conceptualization and measurement of teacher responses, their consequences, and their antecedents, which will be addressed below and which the studies in this special issue attempt to address.

Conceptualization and Measurement of Teacher Responses to Bullying

When confronted with bullying incidents among students, teachers can choose from a repertoire of responses (e.g., Rigby, 2014). In the early 2000's, scholars have started to conceptualize and assess teachers' responses to bullying using hypothetical vignettes (e.g., Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Craig et al., 2000; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). In this type of studies, teachers are provided with fictive, but reality-based bullying scenarios and are asked to indicate whether and/or how they would respond to these situations if they would encounter them in their own practice. For instance, Bauman et al. (2008) developed the Handling Bullying Questionnaire (HBQ) and identified five responses, which they labelled as ignoring the incident, disciplining the bully, working with the bully, working with the victim, and enlisting other adults. Research with the HBQ in both the US and different European countries demonstrated that disciplining the bully was the most preferred strategy by teachers and that ignoring the incident was the least reported response (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Van der Zanden et al., 2015). A drawback of this type of measurements is that it assesses teachers' intended responses in hypothetical situations, not their actual behavior in real bullying

incidents. To address this issue, researchers have developed teacher questionnaires to capture their behavior in actual bullying incidents. For instance, the Classroom Management Policies Questionnaire (CMPQ) (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015) consists of items requesting teachers to indicate to which extent they use a certain strategy when students are victimized in their class. In a study with the CMPQ, Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2015) distinguished six possible teacher responses, i.e., three more active responses (punishing aggressors, separating students, and contacting parents) and three more passive strategies (suggesting avoidance to the victim, suggesting assertion to the victim, advising independent coping to the students involved). As in the studies with the HBQ, research in the US demonstrated that disciplining (i.e., punishing aggressors) was the most reported strategy (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

So far, the instruments referred to used teacher reports of their (hypothetical or real) responses to bullying. However, these teacher reports may be subject to social desirability (Campaert et al., 2017). In addition, it has been argued that students build their own, unique perceptions of teachers' behavior in bullying situations, depending on their individual mental schemes and taking into account that teachers may behave differently to different students (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). Student perceptions of teacher responses may, in turn, be more predictive of teachers' bullying behaviors than teachers' self-reports (Troop-Gordon et al., 2021). To assess student perceptions of teachers' responses to bullying, Troop-Gordon and Quenette (2010) developed a student version of the CMPQ (cf. supra), the Perceived Teacher Response Scale. They identified five responses similar to the CMPQ, i.e., two more active (punishing aggressors, contacting parents) and the three more passive responses mentioned above (suggesting avoidance to the victim, suggesting assertion to the victim, and advising independent

coping to the students involved). Contacting parents was reported as the most frequent response, followed by punishing aggressors. More recently, Campaert et al. (2017) developed a student-reported questionnaire of teachers' responses to bullying and victimization respectively, inspired by instruments using hypothetical vignettes (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). In their study, they identified group discussion, mediation, and disciplinary sanctions as responses to bullying, besides non-response. Further, non-response, group discussion, mediation, and victim support were distinguished as responses to victimization. Of note, mediation in this questionnaire does not refer to the formal strategy this label is often used for, whereby a neutral mediator helps two conflicting parties to solve their dispute and which is often considered as less appropriate to resolve bullying, given the power imbalance (Rigby, 2014). Rather, mediation refers to more general teacher behaviors immediately following the incident aimed at helping the students to solve the problem. Both for bullying and victimization, group discussion and mediation were the most common and non-response the least common teacher response. In addition, a study by Wachs and colleagues (2019) used a student questionnaire to assess both teachers' responses to bullying and their success in stopping bullying. Compared to the conceptualizations mentioned above distinguishing specific strategies, Wachs et al. (2019) assessed broader categories of strategies in responding to bullying, based on a categorization of Seidel & Oertel (2017): authoritarian-punitive strategies, supportive-individual strategies to victim and/or bully, and supportive-cooperative strategies involving others (e.g., classmates, parents). Supportive-individual strategies were the most frequently reported and supportive-cooperative strategies the least frequently reported. Interestingly, unlike previous studies with teacher reports, studies with student reports did not show disciplinary actions as the most common type of teacher responses to bullying (Campaert et al., 2017; Troop-Gordon

& Quenette, 2010; Wachs et al., 2019). The studies by Campaert et al. (2017) and Wachs et al. (2019) align in that, according to students, supportive-individual strategies are most common; indeed, mediation, most common in Campaert's study, can be labelled as a supportive-individual strategy as it only involves bully and victim,. Further Campaert et al. (2017) found that group discussion was equally common as mediation and Troop-Gordon and Quenette (2010) demonstrated contacting parents as the most common strategy. Both group discussion and contacting parents can be considered as supportive-cooperative strategies; yet, Wachs et al. (2019) found supportive-cooperative strategies to be the least common.

In sum, scholars so far have conceptualized and measured teacher responses to bullying in different ways. According to Troop-Gordon & Quenette (2010), strategies can be categorized as either supportive to the victim (e.g., punishing aggressors, contacting parents), critical to the victim (e.g., suggesting assertion to the victim) or neglectful (e.g., suggesting independent coping). The conceptualization by Seidel & Oertel (2017), used by Wachs et al. (2019) and previously also identified by Burger et al. (2015), distinguishes responses based on, first, different targets (i.e., victims, bullies, context) which may be linked to the participant role approach of bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996) and, second, types of action by the teachers (i.e., authoritarian, supportive) which can be linked to theorizing in the domain of parenting. Regarding the latter, four parenting styles have been distinguished, based on configurations of the dimensions of responsiveness and control: democratic (high responsiveness, moderate control), permissive (high responsiveness, low control), authoritarian (low responsiveness, high control) and neglectful (low responsiveness and low control (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Whereas the authoritarian-punitive teacher responses in Wachs et al. (2019) show similarities with the authoritarian parenting style, supportive-cooperative and supportive-

individual strategies can be linked to the democratic parenting style. The active strategies distinguished by Bauman et al. (2008) and Campaert et al. (2017) can be linked to the broader categories distinguished by Wachs et al. and the non-intervention distinguished by Bauman and Campaert (absent in Wachs' conceptualization) can be linked with the neglectful parenting styles. However, theoretical models for teacher responses have not yet been fully developed. In addition, most studies so far have used instruments using hypothetical bullying scenarios, which do not necessarily represent the variety of bullying incidents in schools and refer to teachers' intended rather than their real responses (Wachs et al., 2019). Recently a few instruments assessing teacher and student perceptions of teachers' responses in real bullying incidents have become available and validated, but evidence with these instruments remains very scarce (e.g., Campaert et al., 2017; Troop-Gordon et al., 2021; Wachs et al., 2019). This special issue aims to contribute to the further conceptualization, theoretical underpinnings, and measurement of teachers' responses to bullying.

The studies in this issue extend the existing research by using and investigating similar conceptualizations and instruments on the one hand, and revising and developing new instruments on the other in various European countries and the US. More specifically, three studies focus on the teacher responses identified by Bauman et al. (2008) and used the HBQ, assessing teacher reports of their hypothetical responses to bullying vignettes in Czech (Kollerova et al., this issue)[1], Swedish (Bayrem Özdemir et al., this issue), Austrian, Cypriot, and Turkish (Strohmeier et al., this issue) samples. Fischer et al. (this issue) did not assess teachers' specific strategies in responding to bullying but investigated their likelihood to immediately intervene in a bullying incident.

[1] The papers in this issue are listed in the list of references by identification of the online publications.

Interestingly, they used both teacher and student responses to a hypothetical vignette, based on Yoon & Kerber (2003) as well as to a real relational bullying incident in the recent past. This study in Germany compared teacher and student perceptions, as well as teacher responses to hypothetical and real to bullying. In addition, in an Austrian study, Strohmeier and Gradinger (this issue) developed a new questionnaire, the Handling Hate-post Questionnaire, measuring teachers' intended responses to a hypothetical (ethnic) victimization incident, inspired by the HBQ (Bauman et al., 2008). Three other studies assessed teachers' responses to real bullying incidents, two of which were teacher reports. Ten Bokkel et al. (this issue) distinguished active and passive teacher responses and used a revised version of the CMPQ (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015) in a large, nationwide sample of Dutch elementary students. Waasdorp et al. (this issue) investigated ten different responses (e.g., intervened with the bully, talked to an administrator, did not intervene) and asked which responses US teachers used in recent bullying incidents. Finally, the Italian study by Nappa et al. (this issue) investigated the five strategies distinguished by Campaert et al. (2017) and is unique in this issue by its use of student reports of teachers' bullying in real life, using a revision of Campaert's questionnaire.

Consequences of Teacher Responses to Bullying

Through their responses to bullying, teachers may impact students' bullying behaviors. First, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posited that teachers' responses may serve as models of relational strategies which students may adopt. By using responses that stand up against bullying, teachers set expectations for positive interactions in the classroom (Veenstra et al., 2014). Second, based on goal-framing theory (Lindenberg, 2008), it is assumed that teachers, as significant adults, are able to strengthen students' anti-bullying attitudes and, by their active responses, help inhibit goals that encourage bullying, such as social dominance (Veenstra et al., 2014). Third,

referring to the participant role approach of bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), teachers, like peers, or even more given their higher status, can be considered to be bystanders in the bullying process and thereby discourage or reinforce bullying (Yoon et al., 2020). Just like peers, teachers can be either 'outsiders', e.g., when they ignore or do not intervene in bullying, or 'defenders', e.g., when they correct the bully (Yoon et al., 2020). In addition, teachers may (unintentionally) play the role of 'reinforcer', e.g., by laughing at the bullying or even the role of assistant, e.g., by blaming the victim (Sokol et al., 2016). Fourth and relatedly, teacher responses may influence students' expectations about the social consequences of pro- or anti-bullying behaviors in their class, and, hence, their engagement in future bullying (e.g., Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). For instance, by not intervening in bullying, teachers may reinforce bullies' social dominance and students' expectations of further bullying to be successful, and thereby increase the chance that bullying is repeated (cf. Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Recently, this theorizing has been supported by cross-sectional studies showing that active teacher responses are linked with lower bullying levels (e.g., Campaert et al., 2017; Veenstra et al., 2014; Wachs et al., 2019) and that non-response is associated with more bullying (e.g., Campaert et al., 2017). However, in several studies, not all responses were linked to bullying and findings are inconclusive. For instance, Wachs et al. (2019) demonstrated that supportive-cooperative strategies were more effective on the short and long term, compared to supportive-individual and authoritarian-punitive responses. Yet, Campaert et al. (2017) found that supporting the victim (a supportive-individual strategy) and disciplining the bully (an authoritarian response) were related to lower bullying, but group discussion (a supportive-cooperative strategy) and mediation were not. In longitudinal studies with the CMPQ, separating students predicted lower victimization, but the other active or passive responses were not related to victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Troop-

Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

In addition, a few studies have investigated the moderating role of teacher responses to bullying in the effect of victimization on student outcomes, demonstrating that the use of use of passive responses (e.g., advocating avoidance) enhanced the effect of victimization on internalizing (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010) and externalizing problems (Troop-Gordon et al., 2021). More active responses, such as contacting parents and separating students, buffered the effect of victimization on emotional maladjustment (Troop-Gordon et al., 2021). However, results were not consistent either as Troop-Gordon et al. (2021) could not replicate the moderating effect of passive strategies in the link between victimization and internalizing problems found in the earlier study.

The first four studies in this special issue extend the research regarding the consequences of teacher responses to bullying by focusing on different bullying-related outcomes. Firstly, the study by Nappa et al. (this issue) investigated whether teachers' and parents' responses to offline bullying have an effect on adolescents' cyberbullying. Secondly, an experimental vignette study in Belgium (Demol et al., this issue) manipulated teacher responses to examine their effects on students' bullying attitudes and their perceptions of the teacher. The next two studies investigated the effects of teacher responses for victimized students in particular. Ten Bokkel et al. (this issue) looked at victimized students' disclosure to the teacher and how it is predicted by teachers' responses, using a longitudinal design. Bayrem Özdemir et al. (this issue), in turn, focused on the moderating role of teacher responses in the effects of ethnic victimization on students' depressive symptoms and self-esteem.

Determinants of Teacher Responses to Bullying

Research has shown that responses to bullying vary considerably among teachers (Yoon et al., 2016). Knowledge about the determinants of whether and how teachers

respond to bullying is key to promoting their adequate intervening in incidents. Referring to socio-ecological frameworks, it is likely that teachers' responses to bullying are predicted by both individual and contextual factors (Strohmeier & Gradinger, this issue; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Building on the transactional theory of coping (Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), Yoon and Bauman (2014) have argued that bullying incidents are stressful situations for teachers which require a coping process, including cognitive appraisal of the meaning of the incident and identifying and evaluating possible behavioral options. According to this theory, cognitive appraisal and the decision making about which action to take can be explained by individual and contextual factors. In a cross-sectional study based on this theory, using the HBQ, Yoon et al. (2016) found that the type of bullying mattered: Teachers were more likely to respond to physical, than to verbal and relational bullying. Another predictor at the contextual level was perceived hostile school climate, which was related to more disciplining of bullies and less involving of other adults in the response to bullying. At the individual level, teachers' gender, ethnicity, and their own victimization status in childhood, were linked with their responses.

In addition, scholars have referred to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior to predict teachers' responses to bullying, focusing on individual teacher characteristics (e.g., Hawley & Williford, 2015; Van Verseveld et al., 2019; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Based on this theory, it is assumed that teachers' responses to bullying are predicted by their intention to intervene which is, in turn, predicted by their normative beliefs about bullying and victimization, their attitudes about responses, and their perceived self-efficacy in tackling bullying (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). In line with this theory, a number of cross-sectional studies have investigated the role of self-efficacy and found that teachers who felt more competent in reducing bullying reported stronger intentions to

intervene (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014) and a higher rate of intervening in real bullying (e.g., De Luca et al., 2019; Fischer & Bilz, 2019). Regarding teachers' attitudes, research demonstrated that teachers' beliefs about bullying predicted their responses (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015), e.g., when teachers believed that bullying is normative, they were less likely to reprimand perpetrators and more likely to use passive responses (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). Further, it was shown that teachers' perceived seriousness of bullying was linked with their likelihood to intervene (e.g., Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

Most of the current research regarding the antecedents of teacher responses to bullying focuses on a small set of possible predictors (see Yoon et al., 2016 for an exception). The fifth and sixth studies in this issue by Strohmeier and Gradinger and by Waasdorp et al. add to this literature by investigating a larger set of individual and contextual factors to predict teachers' responses to bullying, in line with socio-ecological frameworks and the transactional theory of coping (cf. supra). Further, the work by Strohmeier and Gradinger (this issue) is innovative by its focus on teachers' responses to a particular type of (cyber)bullying, i.e., hate postings related to the target's ethnicity. The next two studies in this issue add to the existing evidence base by focusing on scarcely studied predictors of teacher responses at the individual level, i.e., teachers' empathy for victims (Fischer et al., this issue) and the school level, i.e., the school collegial climate (Kollerova et al., this issue). Furthermore, the studies by Fischer et al. (this issue) and Waasdorp (this issue) are rather unique by investigating teacher responses in real bullying situations, whereas the large majority of previous studies investigated predictors of teachers' hypothetical responses. Finally, Van Aalst et al. (issue) focused on one potential determinant of teacher responses to bullying, i.e., teachers' self-efficacy in intervening in social dynamics, and

investigated its interplay with the teacher-student relationship in predicting student victimization and self-esteem.

Other Issues

Different Types of Bullying

Whereas most of the studies in this issue investigated bullying in general, a few of them focused on specific types of bullying, i.e., cyber-bullying (Strohmeier & Gradinger, this issue; Nappa et al., this issue) and ethnic bullying (Bayrem Özdemir et al., this issue; Strohmeier & Gradinger, this issue). Yoon et al. (2016) found that teachers perceived physical bullying as more serious than verbal and relational bullying, and were more willing to intervene in physical bullying, as compared to the other types. This underscores the need for more research studying teacher responses to specific bullying situations. The studies on ethnic and cyber-bullying in this issue are timely, as in current society, more and more children are at risk of being the target of these types of aggression (e.g., NASEM, 2016; Russell et al., 2012).

Malleability of Teacher Responses to Bullying

Research regarding the effects of anti-bullying programs has mainly focused on student bullying and victimization (e.g., Gaffney et al., 2021), which is logical as reducing these types of aggression is the main aim of those programs. However, as teachers are often involved and usually deliver these programs, insight into the working mechanisms of anti-bullying interventions could be increased by investigating effects on teachers as well. This is illustrated in a longitudinal study by Saarento et al. (2015), who found that the effects of the KiVa anti-bullying program involving teachers, were mediated, among others, by students' perceptions of teachers' increased anti-bullying attitudes. A recent meta-analysis identified only thirteen studies investigating the effects of whole school anti-bullying interventions on teachers (Van Verseveld et al., 2019). The study showed

positive, moderately high effects on teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy as well as positive, but smaller effects on teacher intervention in bullying situations. Effects varied widely across studies and the largest effects were found for programs including a component which directly targeted teachers. The last study in this special issue by Strohmeier et al. adds to this scarce research by unravelling effects of the Viennese Social Competence (ViSC) intervention, including teacher training, on teachers' perceived knowledge, competence, and their intentions to intervene in hypothetical bullying scenarios, in three different countries.

Conclusion

In sum, whereas teachers can play a key role in tackling bullying at school, their responses to bullying have been understudied so far and the available research regarding the conceptualization and measurement, consequences, antecedents, and malleability shows important limitations. With this special issue we, together with all authors, aim to extend and deepen the evidence base on teachers' responses to bullying and thereby contribute to theory building and anti-bullying intervention practice.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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