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Article in *Theory Into Practice* · October 2014

DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2014.947226

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Teachers: A Critical But Overlooked Component of Bullying Prevention and Intervention

To complete this special issue on theoretical bases for antibullying efforts in schools, we focus in this article on the importance of teachers and other educators in the ecology of schools. First, we present evidence that teachers are not perceived to be effective at intervening when bullying occurs. Then, using a social motivational lens, we provide an overview of teachers' role as a socializing agent in the classroom and school with a particular emphasis on their

influence on bullying behaviors among students. Then we present two theories, the theory of planned behaviors, and the transactional theory of emotions and coping. We believe these theories highlight the complexity of teacher responses and make the case that teachers need more than knowledge of bullying to be effective in their role. We discuss implications for teacher training and professional development.

ALTHOUGH PREVIOUS RESEARCH has examined many aspects of bullying (e.g., prevalence, risk and protective factors, gender differences, developmental trajectories, and more), little attention has been paid to the role of

teachers in students' experience of bullying. The social ecological perspective emphasizes "the social ecology that encompasses the daily life of youth dictates engagement or non-engagement in bullying and/or victimization behaviors" (Espelage & Swearer, 2004, p. 4). Salmivalli's article in this special issue discusses the role of peer group in the ecology of bullying, with a special emphasis on the importance of including peers in prevention and intervention programs. Another component of the social ecology of bullying is the nature of social experiences that the teachers create for students. In the daily events of a school, it is the teachers who are most often in

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the position to intervene when bullying occurs. Referrals to principals and school counselors are common strategies, but specific guidelines for how to respond when the inevitable case of bullying comes to teachers' attention, either by observation or student reports (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005), are rarely provided to teachers. Batsche and Knoff (1994) observed that "the response of school personnel to bullying is, at best, disappointing" and "it is clear that school personnel do relatively little to intervene in the bullying cycle at school" (p. 168). The evidence is that not much has changed since that statement was made. In this article, we discuss the importance of teacher responses to bullying based on a social motivation model, and describe different theoretical models of understanding teacher responses to bullying incidents. These models are presented with special attention to potential implications for antibullying prevention and intervention and professional development for teachers.

Current Literature on Teacher Responses to Bullying

The scant literature on teacher responses to bullying reveals that students' perceptions of teachers' effectiveness differs from that of teachers, and that teachers, themselves, are unsure of how to respond when bullying occurs (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Rigby & Bauman, 2010). Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007) found that 61.5% of middle school students and 57% of high school students believed that teachers made bullying situations worse when they intervened, and 51.7% of students at both levels reported that they had observed adults at school ignoring a bullying incident. Rigby and Barnes (2002) reported findings from a study of 33,236 Australian elementary and secondary students. Only 27% of students indicated that they had reported their victimization to a teacher, and among those who did tell a teacher, the bullying got worse for 16% of reporters, with no change reported by another 28%. This pattern of students' perception is more likely to perpetuate underreporting of

bullying incidents, creating a cycle of repeated victimization.

A recent national study by the National Education Association (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011) suggested that a majority of teachers reported a need for additional training regarding how to intervene effectively in all forms of bullying. Researchers also observed that teachers are "key agents of change" (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003, p. 19), and should be considered targets of bullying intervention (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Yoon, Bauman, Choi, & Hutchison, 2011).

Teachers' Role as a Socializing Agent in Response to Bullying

Although a positive class and school environment is considered to be an important context of antibullying efforts, the way teachers may influence bullying experiences among students has not been considered in the literature. Recent studies provide preliminary evidence that teacher responses to bullying are likely to play a role in student behaviors. Specifically, Hektner and Swenson (2012) found that teachers' responses to bullying affected the level of bullying behavior in their students, and influenced the degree to which student bystanders were willing to intervene. Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2010) found that the strategies teachers used to address incidents of bullying were associated with the levels of students' aggressive behavior. Specifically, teachers who subscribed to beliefs that bullying is a normative behavior were less likely to say that they would reprimand aggressive students and were more likely to utilize passive responses when bullying occurred. Furthermore, in those classrooms in which teachers separated students who had been involved in aggressive behavior, aggression declined from fall to spring. Several teacher actions had differential effects on students; when teachers advised victimized children to be assertive, victimization increased among boys but not girls.

Although the process of teacher influences on bullying behaviors and bystander behaviors

are not yet well articulated in the literature, we argue that teacher responses to bullying incidents reflect the larger context of classroom management and climate, and serve as socialization experiences for potential perpetrators, victims, and other students, determining students' future behaviors and thus social and emotional adjustment. Specifically, a social motivation model, when applied to teacher responses to bullying, highlights the way teachers may discourage bullying behaviors and facilitate socially competent behaviors. According to Noddings (1992), teachers promote positive social behaviors in the classroom by modeling caring relationships, communicating with students to ensure behavioral expectations are clear and understood, highlighting positive social behaviors in students, and generating opportunities for students to demonstrate their concern for others. Similarly, Wentzel (2003) argued that students' interpersonal interactions and relationships with teachers and peers influence their social behaviors by two mechanisms: direct influence (e.g., modeling, advice, information) and indirect influence of "socialization process as one of adults communicating goals and expectations for specific behaviors and then providing a context where these goals are learned and subsequently internalized" (p. 322).

This approach suggests that teacher responses to bullying incidents are likely to affect students in many different ways. Teachers model insensitive, uncaring behaviors when they repeatedly ignore bullying incidents or when they treat a perpetrator using harsh, humiliating responses. Victims are sometimes made to feel uncared for or unwelcome (or worse—at fault for their own mistreatment), and teachers' harsh and unfair handling of bullies amounts to victimization of the bullies by the teacher. Wentzel's (2003) notion of indirect influence also suggests that teacher responses to bullying incidents are likely to communicate goals and expectations for bullying behaviors and to offer various opportunities where the social goals and expectations are internalized to different degrees. Ignoring bullying tells students that they cannot expect teachers to assist them, and may communicate a lack of concern about the behavior (Yoon &

Kerber, 2003). Relying on referral to an authority, such as the principal, may imply that the teacher is either unprepared or unwilling to handle the situation at the individual or classroom level. On the other hand, teaching pro-social skills to the class and creating and maintaining a positive class/school climate, promoted by principals, may communicate that all students have a role in reducing bullying; contacting parents may communicate that the adults are collaborators in addressing the problems. Instead of relying on only punitive strategies, or routinely referring perpetrators to authorities, teachers may choose to facilitate class discussions about bullying to communicate the expected behaviors and facilitate internalization of the class rules and norms. Again, these strategies describe an approach that promotes positive social goals and expectations and facilitates students' self-reliance and problem solving strategies.

When applied to addressing students' bullying behaviors, the social motivational model not only highlights the importance of teacher responses to bullying, but also suggests an extended role of teachers beyond punishing bullies and supporting victims. In fact, the model implies that teachers are "socializers of classroom rules and norms" (Wentzel, 2003, p. 322). The notion of authoritative teaching that reflects a caring attitude and firm demands (Wentzel, 2002) could serve as a useful guideline as teachers engage in working with perpetrators and victims. In this situation, what would be the authoritative teaching? What specific responses would be the response of sensitive, firm teachers? We believe that these guiding questions are important to teachers because the various bullying incidents they have to handle are not the same or simple, but rather present complicated social situations that involve multiple individuals with the dynamic group backgrounds. The complicated nature of bullying incidents teachers have to address indicate that a simple, *how to punish bullies* approach would be limited in its effectiveness. For example, a teacher who sits a bully separate from other students as a way to communicate that bullying is not accepted in the classroom may not have considered how her/his response affects the bully.

We believe that using the authoritative teaching approach, teachers can develop and tailor their responses to bullying that communicate their care for students and demands for expected behaviors, while taking into consideration specific factors that are involved in the bullying incidents.

The authoritative approach is likely to promote better relationships between teachers and students, an important relationship context for students' adjustment. Students who are committed to academic success and feel attached to teachers and other students are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). Yet, studies have shown that aggressive students often experience peer rejection (Miller-Johnson, Coie, Maumary-Gremaud, Berman, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002) and conflictual relationships with teachers (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). Victims also report low levels of teacher support (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Lack of quality relationship with teachers is a concern, as the social motivational model suggests. A challenging issue is a pattern of disciplines and punishment that bullying behaviors demand, which may perpetuate bullies' perception about teachers as someone who is punitive and harsh. When students perceive teachers are not supportive, they are less likely to report bullying incidents to teachers. It is also possible that the nature of teacher–student relationships influence how teachers respond to bullies and victims. Future studies should investigate the role of teacher–student relationships, particularly how they affect teachers' responses to bullying and students' experiences of bullying and victimization.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Teacher Responses to Bullying

It is clear that teachers can exert a great deal of influences on students' experiences of school bullying through their interactions with students, particularly through the way they handle bullying incidents. The existing studies indicate that

teacher responses to bullying significantly vary, yet it is not clear how they respond or what factors influence their responses. Taking action in a bullying situation is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many different factors. Efforts to understand this phenomenon requires a sound theoretical underpinning and a careful analysis of teacher responses.

We considered the theory of planned behaviors (Ajzen, 2012) as a theoretical framework to understand individual teachers' action in a bullying incident. The theory proposes that human behaviors are guided by intentions, and that the intentions are influenced by attitudes toward the behavior, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2012). Based on the theory of planned behaviors, it is conceptualized that a measure of teacher responses (behavioral intentions) is a predictor of actual teacher responses to bullying, and teachers' attitudes about responses, normative beliefs about bullying, and perceived behavioral control are important predictors of their behavioral intentions in response to a bullying incident. The theory also suggests that many demographic and individual level variables influence human behaviors through attitudes and normative beliefs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Consistent with the theory, the existing studies have identified individual level variables associated with teachers' attitude/beliefs and responses to bullying incidents. Teachers' gender plays a role: Female teachers are more likely to rate bullying situations as more severe than male teachers (Green, Shriberg, & Farber, 2008). Teachers' personal experiences with bullying appeared to affect their perceptions and actions. In a qualitative study by Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener (2005), teachers and administrators reported that their personal victimization experience made them more sensitive and aware of bullying, whereas Kokkoa and Pörhölä (2009) found that prospective teachers who had personal experiences of victimization were more likely to take a proactive stance against school bullying. Teachers who reported being victims of bullying in their childhood were more likely to discipline bullies and involve adults to respond to bullies, compared to teachers who had different experi-

ences with bullying in their youth, whereas they were more likely to do nothing when responding to victims (Yoon, Sulkowski, & Bauman, under review). As the theory suggests, teachers' personal experiences of victimization as a child are likely to influence their attitude and beliefs about bullying in general, and thus respond differently when they address a bullying incident in school. For example, personal experiences such as victimization may influence how teachers feel toward, and respond to, victims. Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) and Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found that preservice teachers' empathy for victims was related to the likelihood of intervention. Another individual level variable is how confident teachers feel about addressing a bullying situation. Yoon (2004) found that teacher's high self-efficacy predicted teachers' intention to intervene in physical, verbal, and relational bullying situations. In Bradshaw et al.'s (2007) study, teachers with high self-efficacy reported a greater confidence in the effectiveness of their strategies.

When applied to teacher responses to bullying incidents, the theory of planned behaviors suggests that teachers' attitude and beliefs about bullying should be examined to better understand teacher responses to bullying. The current literature indicates that perceived seriousness of bullying situations, empathy toward victims, and self-efficacy are likely to influence teacher responses to bullying. These findings also provide an important direction in teacher training, and the current training approach such as relying on giving teachers more information about bullying should be reconsidered. Rather, the training should target teachers' attitudes and beliefs about bullying in ways to promote greater empathy toward victims, increase their confidence in handling bullying behaviors, and help them see the seriousness of bullying. The effectiveness of teacher training should be evaluated with the changes in these attitudes and beliefs in mind.

We believe that a modification of the transactional theory of coping (Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) also provides a useful psychological framework for understanding teacher responses to bullying incidents and

identifying various factors that may influence teacher responses. We conceptualize an educator's experience of an incident of school bullying as a stressful one; this theory explains how individuals cope with such situations. According to Lazarus (1999), coping is defined as "the way people manage life conditions that are stressful" (p. 102). In organizing a response to that event, this model posits that both individual factors and situational factors affect the appraisal process by which one evaluates the situation and determines a course of action. The theory further suggests that the appraisal process consists of primary and secondary appraisal. The primary appraisal is the meaning that one assigns to the event (Is this bullying? Is it serious?), whereas the secondary appraisal is the evaluation of the available options (Shall I send the bully to the principal? Assign detention?).

This particular theoretical framework proposes that a stressful event generally calls for an immediate, rather than a reflective, response. Such situations elicit cognitive appraisal and emotional responses, and the responses to the incident are understood as products of a coping process. According to the theory, individual and contextual variables are likely to explain cognitive appraisal and emotional reactions when teachers have to handle bullying incidents. For example, teachers' responses differ depending on the types of bullying incidents; they are less likely to intervene when bullying is not physical (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). This pattern of teacher responses to physical versus nonphysical bullying is related to perceived seriousness of the situation, level of empathy toward victims, and self-efficacy in behavioral management (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). These findings corroborate the notion that teacher responses to bullying involve a process of cognitive appraisal about different aspects of bullying incidents and emotional reaction to those involved. Other findings further suggest that the cognitive and emotional process may be influenced by the interaction between individual and situational factors. For example, when teachers and students were matched in gender, teachers were more likely to discipline victims of peer

aggression. When the ethnicity of teachers and students differed, teachers were less likely to discipline bullies and are more likely to involve classroom peers in addressing bullies (Yoon et al., under review).

In summary, the theory highlights the complicated nature of teacher responses to bullying, and the research findings support that the cognitive and emotional processes that teachers engage in while handling bullying are influenced by the interacting individual and contextual variables such as gender, ethnicity, personal experiences, and type of bullying. Relevant to teacher training is the implication of this theory that educators need to better understand how these person and situational variables contribute to teachers' cognitive evaluation (appraisal) and emotional experiences of bullying incidents; it is the interpretation, evaluation, or appraisal of teachers that educators could address as a target of training. As such, the questions of how these person and situational variables influence cognitive appraisal and emotional reactions and what types of cognitive appraisals are linked to certain teacher responses need to be empirically investigated.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, we have focused on the crucial role that teachers play in the social ecology of bullying in schools. We examined the sparse existing literature, and described several theoretical perspectives that consider the complexity of the bullying dynamic. Few programs for preservice teachers or in-service training programs provide any training on bullying; when such training is available, it tends to focus on information about bullying without reference to the factors that are involved in a teacher's decision to respond (vs. ignore) and what specific action he or she will use. A review of research suggests that teacher responses should be understood in a broad context of classroom management and interpersonal relationships and are influenced by individual and contextual variables. We advocate for a more thoughtful, process-oriented training approach that would help teachers understand

their own predispositions while also providing a wide range of strategies that teachers can then adapt to situations they encounter.

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