Bullying in Romanian Schools: Teachers Perceptions and Their Responses to Three Types of Bullying Behavior

Tudoriţa Grădinariu*

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perceived severity of three types of bullying: physical, verbal and social exclusion. Six written vignettes illustrating the three types of bullying were given to 322 secondary school teachers in all secondary schools in Iasi County. The results indicate differences in the perceived severity assessment by teachers for each type of bullying. According to previous findings, teachers perceived social exclusion as being less serious than verbal and physical aggression. The second objective of this study was to analyze teachers response to bullies and victims involved in each type of that behavior. The results highlight that teachers who perceive physical, verbal and social exclusion as very seriously report an increased likelihood of response to bullies and victims.

This area is not in the attention of Romanian researchers, although the literature specifies the important role that teachers have in prevent bullying behavior. This findings come to support researchers and headteachers in developing more effective prevention and intervention programs to reduce bullying among school-aged students.

Keywords: bullying, teachers’ perceptions, response to bullying, bully, victim.

1. Introduction

School bullying is a very old phenomenon (Olweus, 1994). The interest of the academic community for this form of interaction between students debuted with the studies developed by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus in 1970, as a consequence of the impact created by the suicide of three students who were the victims of bullying from their peers.

In the opinion of Stockdale et al. (2002) no culture and no country is immune to the matter of aggression. The Romanian research regarding bullying in schools is in pioneering stage. Both the social and political context of Romania are marked by the transition from communism to democracy, as a result of the 1989 Revolution and the 2007 integration in the European Union. This fact attracted multiple changes in the social, political, juridical and educational areas.

According to the study of the Institute of Education Sciences in Romania (2016), violence in school has been investigated for about 15 years, the psychological field being the priority (Mitulescu et al., 2016, p.9). However, the few studies which investigate the bullying behavior differentiated by other forms of aggression between students, indicate a high prevalence of this phenomenon. According to the results of the research conducted by Beldean-Galea, Jurcău and Țigan (2010) amongst secondary school students, 33.8% of them bullied other peers “once a week or more often” and 40.5% of them were victims “once a week or more often”.

Bullying is also a tradition in Romanian schools, some behaviors among students such as ironies, teasing, violent acts have always existed, “the psychosocial aspects of group life, including undoubtedly conflictual situations resulting in
physical or verbal violence” (Jigău, Liiceanu & Preoteasa, 2005, p.55).

Literature in this field reflects the increased interest of researchers around the world in documenting and studying bullying behaviour. Thus, studies conducted in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States have revealed the presence of bullying behavior (Jimerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2009). Recent studies show that 246 million students are involved every year in various forms of aggression in school. These estimates of children and adolescents affected by school bullying vary between countries and studies, ranging from less than 10% to over 65% (UNESCO, 2017).

Although bullies and victims of bullying have been in the attention of researchers for a long time, there is an increased interest in the role of the teacher in preventing and combating school bullying (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

In a study conducted in Australia by Rigby and Barnes (2002), on 33,236 students aged 8-18 years, 46% reported that have been aggressed during school years. The results show that 38% of the students between 8 and 12 reported having told a teacher, while 24% of the ones between 13 and 18 did the same. Also, 57% of the bullied students reported that things had not improved after telling and 8% said that things had got worse.

Teachers play a major role in identifying signs of victimization and in encouraging students to report aggression (Smith & Shu, 2000). Olweus (1993) states that “the attitudes of teachers towards bully/victim problems and their behavior in bullying situations are of major importance for the extent of the bully/victim problem in the school or the class”.

2. Definition of bullying

The most comprehensive definition of the bullying behavior is presented by Olweus. In his book, “Bullying in school”, Olweus explains that one student is bullied “when he/she is repeatedly and over time exposed to negative actions coming from one or more peers” (Olweus, 1994, 1997). The negative action, from Olweus’s perspective, targets the intentional manner through which a person causes or tries to cause suffering, hurt, inconveniences to another person and it can manifest itself as through physical contact, words, grimaces, obscene gestures, as well as the intentional exclusion from a group (Olweus, 1994, 1997).

In Olweus’s acceptation, the bullying behavior is characterized by the following three criteria: (a) it is an aggressive behavior or intentional “harmdoing”, (b) which is carried out “repeatedly and over time”, (c) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1994, 2000).

The bullying is an interaction in which a dominant individual (the bully) repeatedly manifests an aggressive behavior with the intention of causing suffering to a less dominant individual (the victim)” (Olweus, 1991; Smith & Thomson, 1991).

Regarding the manifestation forms of bullying, Olweus (1994) considers it is useful to distinguish between direct bullying, with relatively open attacks on the victim, and indirect bullying in the form of social isolation and intentional exclusion from a group.

Direct bullying includes all forms of physical and verbal aggression, such as hitting, kicking, threatening, name-calling, insulting. Indirect bullying includes aspects of social isolation such as ignoring, excluding and backbiting (Van der Wal, de Wit & Remy, 2003).

3. The consequences of bullying

According to the European Report on the Prevention of Violence and Crime Among Youths conducted by the World Health Organization in 2010, inter-personal violence is the third cause of death in the European Region among young people aged 10-29 and leads to the loss of 15,000 of life annually.

Students involved in bullying are at increased risk of developing a range of psychosomatic symptoms, experiencing a range of type risks such as run away from home, alcohol and drug abuse, absenteeism, and self-harm.

The consequences of bullying also extend to adulthood, research highlighting a significant correlation between
aggressive behavior of the child and subsequent psychiatric morbidity (WHO, 2010). Currently, bullying is a major public health problem in the European region.

Specialists take into account social, academic and psychological devastating consequences of bullying behavior: anxiety, depression, social isolation, delinquent behavior, poor academic achievements and development of personality disorders in adulthood (Sesar, Barisic, Pandza & Dodaj, 2012; Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

Farrington (1991) argues that society is the biggest victim of aggression because the bully in school is very susceptible to aggressing wife and children in the future, thus perpetuating the cycle of domestic violence creating new generations of aggressive children.

4. Teachers perceptions and their responses to bullying behavior

Professionals’ interest by the investigation of teachers’ perceptions and their reactions to the three type of bullying (physical, verbal and social exclusion) is remarkable. Although, teachers play an important role in the students’ safety in school, there is few data regarding their attitudes towards addressing problems such as bullying (Duong & Bradshaw, 2013). The complexity of the aggressive behavior’s dynamics originates from the difficulty with which adults recognise the bullying behavior (Roberts & Morotti, 2000).

Subjectivity in the interpretation of aggression is based on perception and response towards students involved in bullying and is likely to influence subsequent teacher. If teachers are unaware of the consequences of bullying or do not perceive the severity of these behaviors, they will have a passive attitude towards aggression and a low degree of intervention (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

In an effort to better understand how teachers perceived and react to aggression, Mishna and collaborators (2005) finds, in a qualitative study, that most teachers were themselves aggresssed when they were students.

In authors’ opinion, the bullying behaviors recognition and the reaction towards these behaviors are influenced by several factors, such: perceiving the severity of the situation; if the victims was considered responsible; if the students corresponded to the assumptions regarding the victim characteristics; if the teachers show empathy towards the victims; the school area and the organizational support.

Teachers who do not perceive the incidence of aggression as serious will tend to be passive and ineffective in addressing such behaviors. At the same time, some forms of aggression, such as teasing, social exclusion, and relational aggression, tend to be perceived as less serious, lowering the teacher's chances of intervention (Stankiewicz, 2007). Indirect aggression benefits from special attention because, by the covert nature of manifestations, it is more difficult for teachers to recognize or is not considered a form of violence (Boulton, 1997).

Yoon and Kerber (2003) research findings confirm the conclusions from other studies that teachers appreciate social exclusion as less serious and less likely to intervene than in physical and verbal aggression. Similar results were also issued by Craig, Bell and Leschied (2011): some covert forms of aggression such as relational, homophobia, and cyberbullying are perceived by pre-service teachers as less serious than open, manifest aggression.

Contrary to empirical data that highlights the long-term devastating consequences of student involvement in bullying aggression, a significant number of teachers underestimate the severity of relational aggression. Some professionals investigated the reasons why relational aggression is not in the attention of teachers. Thus, Craig and collaborators (2000) consider that students have the ability to conceal this form of aggression in order for not to be perceived by teachers. On the other hand, the covert nature of relational aggression requires systematic prevention efforts.

5. Purpose of the study

The aim of the present study was to investigate the severity of teachers' perceptions towards three types of bullying: physical, verbal and relational (social exclusion).

The second objective was to analyse teachers’ responses towards bullies and victims involved in each type of that behavior.
6. Method

6.1. Participants

The selected group of subjects consisted of 322 teachers (281 women - 87.3%; 41 men - 12.7%) from all the secondary schools (N=23) in the urban area in Iasi County, representing approximately 85% of the total number of teachers from this city.

Amongst them, 5.2% (n=17) had 0-2 years of experience, 6.5% (n=21) had 3-5 years of experience, 12.9% (n=42) had 6-10 years of experience, 36% (n=117) had 11-20 years of experience, 21.5% (n=70) had 21-30 years of experience, 17.8% (n=58) had more than 31 years of experience in teaching.

6.2. Measures

To assess the perceived severity and reaction of teachers to the bullies and victims involved in the three forms of aggression (physical, verbal and social exclusion), we adapted the questionnaire “Perceived Severity and Response to Bullies and Victims of Bullying” developed by Bush (2009) and modified by Harrison (2015).

Unlike Bush (2009) who used a percentage scale, Harrison (2015) uses a 7 points Likert scale. In the questionnaire adapted by Harrison, are presented eight distinct vignettes, which separately illustrate the acts of violence amongst students: physical, verbal, social exclusion and cyber-bullying.

In the present research we used the adapted version of the questionnaire released by Harrison (2015) for the three types of bullying: physical, verbal and social exclusion. We eliminated the last two vignettes that referred to cyber-bullying because we do not investigate this kind of aggression.

We also eliminated the vignette from the "F" position of the questionnaire because this not correspond to the school reality in our country, which we replaced with a scenario which is more often encountered in the Romanian schools.

For the three types of scales that measure perceived severity, response to the bully and response to the victim, we obtained from the total of the items a value of the internal consistency similar to the one of by Harrison (2015) respectively .89.

6.3. Results

Teacher Perceived Severity of three type of Bullying: physical, verbal and relational

After the description of each vignette, the teachers were asked to evaluate the presented situations in terms of severity from 1 (not at all severe) to 7 (very severe).

The descriptive indicators for the data analyzed in Table 1 show that the verbal aggression (M = 6.50, SD = 0.51) is more severe than the physical aggression (M = 6.43, SD = 0.48) and the relational one (M = 6.20, SD=0.62).

These results revealed significant differences in perceiving the severity of the three types of bullying. Teachers perceived relational aggression as less severe than the verbal and physical one.

Table 1. Perceived Severity and Likelihood of Responding to Bully and Victim by Bullying Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Severity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>3 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>4 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>3.5 to 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Likelihood of Responding to Bully

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>4 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.5 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>3 to 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likelihood of Responding to Victim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>1 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>1 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>1 to 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likelihood to response to bullies of bullying

Other questions in the questionnaire ask the participants to specify the probability of response to the bully in the three typical situations of aggression: physical, verbal and relational.

As displayed in Table 1, by the comparison of Mean and Standard Deviation it can be showed that teachers are more likely to respond to the bully of physical aggression (M = 6.83, SD = 0.42) than verbal aggression (M = 6.75, SD = 0.49) and the relational one (M = 6.64, SD = 0.56).

Teachers are more likely to respond toward bully in verbal aggression (M=6.75,SD= 0.49) in contrast to the relational one (M=6.64, SD=0.56).

Likelihood to response to victims of bullying

Regarding the likelihood of responding to the victims, the descriptive analysis (see Table 1) shows that there is an increased probability that teachers will respond to the victims of physical (M = 6.66, SD = 0.49) and verbal aggression (M = 6.60, SD = 0.80). These data reflect that there is a low probability that teachers will response to victims in relational aggression (M = 6.49, SD = 0.87).

In order to establish the correlations between the perceived severity of the three types of bullying (physical, verbal and relational) and the likelihood of intervention, we calculated the Spearman correlation coefficients (see Table 2). Teachers who perceive physical aggression as very severe have an increased likelihood of reacting to the bully (r = .359, p = .000 <0.005) and victim (r = .653, p = .000 <0.005).

Teachers who consider verbal aggression as severe are more likely to react toward bully (r = .527, p = .000 <0.005) and victim (r = .503, p = .000 <0.005).

Participants who consider relational aggression as very severe have an increased likelihood of reacting to the bully (r = .560, p = .000 <0.005) and victim (r = .557, p = .000 <0.005).

Table 2. Correlations between perceived severity and responses to bully and victim involved in bullying (Spearman Correlation Coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Severity</td>
<td></td>
<td>.359**</td>
<td>.293**</td>
<td>.414**</td>
<td>.235**</td>
<td>.212**</td>
<td>.366**</td>
<td>.256**</td>
<td>.253**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© EdLearning.it
From the analysis of the correlation matrix that includes the socio-demographic variables and the main variables of the study, it can be noted that younger teachers tend to consider physical aggression as more severe compared to older teachers ($r = -.198$, $p = .000 <0.005$).

The teachers with less teaching experience tend to regard physical aggression as more severe compared to the teachers with a higher teaching experience ($r = .161$, $p = .004 <0.005$).

7. Discussion

The present study investigated teacher’s perceived severity regarding three types of bullying: physical, verbal and relational. The results show that teachers perceive verbal bullying as more severe than physical and relational bullying. Similar results were obtained in Turkey by Duy (2013). One possible explanation may be that traditional forms of aggression are well known and understood (Byers, Caltabiano & Caltabiano (2011)).

In the current study, younger teachers tend to consider physical aggression as more severe compared to older teachers. Also, teachers with less experience tend to perceive physical aggression as more severe compared to older teachers.

According to the findings of Yoon and Kerber (2003), the degree of perceived severity is different in the three types of aggression. Teacher intervention was significantly less in relational than in physical or verbal bullying. Craig and Pepler (1997) report that teachers are less likely to observe acts of social exclusion because these behaviors are brief and covert.

The results of the study of Yoon and Kerber (2003) indicated that many teachers do not take social exclusion seriously. In our study, the results are in line with previous findings that teachers perceive relational bullying as less seriously than physical and verbal bullying. In the present study, teachers have rated verbal aggression as "very severe" as opposed to the empirical data that encourages the consideration of relational bullying severe.

Another interest in our study was to analyse teachers’ response to bullies and victims involved in each type of bullying. The results are similar with the previous studies indicating that teachers who perceive physical, verbal and relational aggression as very seriously report an increased likelihood of response to bullies and victims.

Literature states that the perception of the severity of the bullying behavior is one the strongest predictors of teacher response to bullying (Yoon & Bauman, 2014).
Similar to the findings of likelihood to reacting toward bully and victim involve in bullying situations, in present study teachers were more like to intervene in verbal and physical bullying than in relational bullying. When teachers are unaware of the severity of aggression among students, they will tend to be passive and inefficient (Stankiewicz, 2007). Teachers perceive covert forms of bullying as less severe and are less likely to take action than the open forms (Byers et al., 2011). There is a possibility that many teachers may not know the extent of the verbal and relational aggression and the damages they can cause to the victims (Howard et al., 2001).

In accordance with the specialists, we specify the teacher's important role in bullying prevention in the school area. It is necessary that the programs for prevention of bullying in school include teachers training. They need to focus on increasing teachers' awareness about bullying, the consequences of this phenomenon and deliver training and support to victims and bullies (Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

References


Duy, B. (2013). Teachers Attitudes Toward Different Types of Bullying and Victimization in Turkey, Psychology in the Schools, 50 (10).


