



The Importance of Teacher Response to Bullying

Full Reference

Mishna, F., Scarcello, I., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2005). Teachers' understanding of bullying. *Canadian Journal of Education, 28*, 718-738.

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Peer victimization, qualitative study, bullying, response to bullying, understanding, teachers

Main Question

How do teachers understand bullying and what are the factors that might influence their recognition of bullying and their response to it?

Background

Bullying does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, because people are embedded in social and environmental contexts, their behaviour is inevitably influenced by those contexts. Bullying unfolds in the social context of the peer group, the classroom, the school, the family, and the larger community. Teachers' responses may be a key factor in children's choices to tell their teacher about their victimization. Unfortunately, children in previous research studies have reported that teachers do not consistently intervene to stop bullying. However, one factor that seems to increase the likelihood of a teacher intervening is the amount of empathy they have for others. Teachers who express empathy for others are more likely to identify bullying and report that they would intervene. Teachers can have a large impact on the daily lives of their students. Their impact includes recognizing and responding to bullying incidents and implementing intervention programs. A first step in looking at the understanding of teachers in the area of bullying is to use qualitative research to learn more about teachers and their experiences and views.

Who Was Involved

Children in four urban public schools (located in communities across the city that differed in average level of family income, family composition, and percentage of recent immigrants) completed surveys about their experience with bullying and peer victimization. Teachers were interviewed about specific children in their class who had reported being frequently bullied. Thirteen teachers were interviewed about 17 children in their classrooms who self-identified being frequently bullied. The interviews lasted from one hour to two and half hours, depending on how many frequently bullied children were in a particular teacher's class. Teachers were asked about their response to hearing that the child reported that they were bullied. Teachers also were asked



about their understanding of bullying, whether the child had told the teacher about being bullied, responses to the child and to other bullying situations raised by the teacher, interactions with the child (and parent, if applicable), and perceptions of school support and the school's ability to respond to bullying.

What We Found

Teachers were unaware that 10 of the 17 children were bullied. Of the seven children whom the teachers knew about, five had been helped by a teacher in a variety of ways. However, over half the frequently victimized children were under the radar of the teachers.

In defining bullying, all teachers identified the existence of a power imbalance and most teachers believed that bullying is an intentional behaviour. Most teachers did not view bullying as necessarily repetitive. They viewed some forms (i.e., physical) as more serious than other forms of bullying. Non-physical victimization was often deemed not serious and thus was overlooked. While teachers did include indirect behaviours in their definitions of bullying, they reported not taking these behaviours as seriously when they witnessed them take place among their students.

Importantly, teachers found identifying and intervening in a bullying situation to be difficult, complex, and confusing. Particular factors impacted how teachers understood and responded to bullying incidents. These factors included whether teachers viewed an incident as serious, whether they considered the victimized child responsible for the bullying, whether the child matched their assumptions about characteristics and behaviours of victimized children, and whether they described feeling empathy for the child. Some teachers, because of how they interpreted the incident, did not intervene in particular bullying incidents.

Even when a teacher was able to provide multiple examples for a given child to demonstrate how other children victimized that target child, he or she still did not necessarily consider the child to be victimized. This was often explained in ways to suggest that the teacher believed the child "asked" for the victimization. Some teachers had a particularly difficult time understanding how exclusion is a form of bullying, and instead, viewed exclusion as a "normal" part of growing up.

Some of the teachers highlighted the discrepancy in their schools around the issue of policies for intervening. Schools often have policies about dealing with direct bullying, but often lack policies addressing indirect bullying. Most of the teachers reported that they did not know how to deal with indirect bullying. As well, most of the teachers had never received training on bullying and expressed the desire for such training.

2



Implications

Even when teachers are able to state a clear definition of bullying, other factors often influenced how they viewed and responded to particular incidents. It is important for teachers to recognize that how they understand and respond to bullying can have an effect on their students. It would be beneficial to provide information to teachers on the factors that can influence individuals' decisions about what is bullying. This information also would help them recognize inconsistencies between their views and their reactions to bullying incidents. Teachers need help to gain awareness of their attitudes. They also need to learn that a child's view may differ from their own and that a child's distress may be greater than an adult anticipates or perceives. Understanding this can increase a teacher's ability to recognize and intervene in bullying situations. It also is important to emphasize the many forms of bullying and the long-term effects of indirect forms of bullying such as exclusion. Teacher training is critical in identifying and responding to bullying. Teachers require, and want, further training to increase their confidence and competence in this area.

