

# Are elementary school teachers prepared to tackle bullying? A pilot study

## **Abstract**

The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers were prepared to tackle bullying. Interview data from 22 Dutch elementary school teachers ( $M$  age=43.3, 18 classrooms in eight schools) were combined with survey data from 373 students of these teachers ( $M$  age=10.7, grades 3–6, ages 8- to 12-years-old, 52.2% boys). The teachers in this study gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom, suggesting that even though teachers are supposed to have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. Implications for future research are discussed.

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# 1 Introduction

Tackling bullying is a difficult task (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004) and it is unclear whether teachers are fully prepared for this task. The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers are prepared to tackle bullying, possibly paving the way for future research on this topic. We argue that at least three conditions have to be met before teachers can successfully intervene in bullying situations in their classroom: First, teachers need to know what bullying is; second, they need to gather information about the bullying among their students; and third, they need to recognize that certain students are being victimized.

## 1.1 Teachers' definitions of bullying

Bauman and Del Rio (2005) argued that the education and training of teachers should begin with a clear definition of bullying to prepare them for their job. School bullying is commonly defined as systematic and intentional behavior directed towards students who find it difficult to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Furthermore, scholars agree that bullying can manifest itself in different forms. These core elements (i.e. systematic, intentional, power difference, and different forms) distinguish bullying from other negative social interactions such as teasing or fighting.

Nearly all previous studies investigating elementary school teachers' definitions of bullying focused on the different forms in which bullying can manifest itself. These studies found that teachers are less likely to perceive indirect forms of bullying (e.g., relational bullying such as gossiping) than direct forms (e.g., physical bullying such as hitting or kicking) as bullying (Asimopoulos, Bibou-Nakou, Hatzipemou, Soumaki, & Tsiantis, 2014; Boulton, 1997). The Bauman and Del Rio (2005) study comes closest to investigating to what extent elementary school teachers' definitions of bullying include the four core elements. These researchers investigated 83 trainee teachers and concluded that the majority of these trainee teachers did not have a clear understanding of the definition of bullying.

## **1.2 Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying**

To our knowledge, no studies explicitly investigated how teachers find out about bullying among their students. It is plausible that teachers obtain this information either by directly observing bullying behavior or by receiving information from others (e.g., students, parents, or colleagues). Studies on school bullying suggest that it is difficult for teachers to directly observe bullying because it tends to occur when teachers are not present or when it is difficult to keep an eye on all students (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Moreover, obtaining information from the students that were involved in bullying may also be challenging. Victims of bullying are often reluctant to inform their teachers because they feel ashamed, are afraid of potential reprisals from the bullies, or fear their reports might be dismissed as non-credible (Novick & Isaacs, 2010; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Likewise, students who witnessed bullying may not inform their teachers because they fear reprisals from the bullies or other classmates if they do so.

## **1.3 Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying**

Even if teachers know what bullying is and have information about what is going on in their classroom, they may still interpret it as playing or other innocent childhood behavior (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Previous studies investigated teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of bullying by comparing teachers' and students' reports on the general prevalence of victimization in the classroom. These studies found that these reports differed substantially from each other. For instance, Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) found that whereas teachers believed that they were sufficiently aware of the bullying in their classroom their students thought teachers were only aware of a fraction of all the incidents of bullying.

We argue that studies investigating teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of bullying should not only focus on the general prevalence of victimization but also on the victimization of individual students. It is important to know whether teachers perceive students who were victimized as victims, because when teachers do not perceive these students as being victimized, it is unlikely that they will intervene and

help them.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Data collection**

Interview data of Dutch elementary school teachers were combined with survey data of students of these teachers. The data were part of a larger ongoing project aiming to evaluate the effectiveness of the Dutch version of the KiVa anti-bullying program (for a detailed overview of the KiVa program see Kärnä et al., 2011). In the fall of 2011, Dutch elementary schools received an invitation to participate in the KiVa program. In the following school year (starting in August 2012) 66 schools implemented the program.

#### *2.1.1 Structured face-to-face interviews with teachers*

Dutch elementary school classrooms usually consist of a constant group of 20 to 30 students and one or two classroom teachers who teach (almost) all subjects. In November 2013, teachers of 15 KiVa schools in the three Northern provinces of the Netherlands (i.e., Groningen, Drenthe, and Friesland) were approached for face-to-face interviews. Northern schools were approached because of their proximity to the university. A trained research assistant conducted interviews with 24 teachers (8 schools) of the 34 invited teachers. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Boulton, 1997), teachers' heavy workloads was mentioned as the main reason for not participating.

Before the teachers were interviewed, the interview procedure was tested in a pilot interview. Based on this pilot interview the formulation of some questions was adjusted. Teachers were assured that their answers would be treated confidentially. All teachers agreed to having their interviews recorded. The length of the interviews ranged from 22 to 50 minutes ( $M$  length=32,  $SD=6.8$ ). Two of the twenty-four interviews were excluded from the study due to a technical problem that made the audio recordings not usable.

### *2.1.2 Student survey data*

All student data reported in this study were collected in KiVa schools in October 2013. The students filled in web-based questionnaires in their schools' computer labs during regular school hours. The questionnaire was tested in order to make sure that the students would understand the questions. Schools sent a letter with information about the study's aims and procedures to students' parents before the data were collected. Parents who did not want their children to participate were requested to return a form to the research team. Students who wished to do so could opt out at any point in time.

## **2.2 Participants**

The combined dataset contained data of 22 Dutch elementary school teachers ( $M$  age=43.3, 18 classrooms in 8 schools) and data of 373 students of these teachers ( $M$  age=10.7, grades 3-6, 52.2% boys). Two students did not fill in the questionnaire.

Consistent with the fact that most elementary school teachers in the Netherlands are women, the majority of the teachers were female (17 teachers). Age ranged from 24 to 62 years ( $M=43.3$ ,  $SD=14$ ), teaching experience ranged from 2 to 42 years ( $M=18.5$ ,  $SD=12.6$ ). Most Dutch teachers work part-time. In line with this, teachers in the sample worked a mean number of 3 days ( $SD=0.90$ ) per week, implying that there was a teaching partner in nearly every classroom. Only one teacher indicated she worked full-time and had no teaching partner. The data contained four pairs of teachers (i.e., eight individual teachers) who taught in the same classroom. The teachers who shared a classroom spent approximately an equal amount of time with their students (e.g., one teacher worked two days per week and the other teacher worked three days per week).

The students were more or less spread evenly over the different grades: 29.2% of the students were in grade 3 (ages 8-9), 19.3% were in grade 4 (ages 9-10), 23.9% were in grade 5 (ages 10-11), and 27.6% were in grade 6 (ages 11-12). The median classroom size was 20.5 students (range 12–27). About 44% of the classrooms contained students of more than one grade. In Dutch elementary schools it is

relatively common that two or three grades are combined in one multi-grade classroom.

## **2.3 Measurements**

### *2.3.1 Definitions of bullying*

Teachers were asked to give their definition of bullying (“How would you define bullying?”). Subsequently, teachers were asked to mention the different forms in which bullying could manifest itself (“Which different forms of bullying can exist?”). It is important to note that the teachers in this study had been participating in the KiVa program for at least a year. Throughout this program the core elements of bullying were regularly emphasized (see Kärnä et al., 2011).

### *2.3.2 Strategies to find out about bullying*

*Teachers.* Teachers were asked what they do to find out how their students are feeling. Although this question was not focused on bullying in specific, probably due to the context of the interview and the questions that had been asked earlier on, nearly all teachers answered this question focusing on strategies to find out about bullying among their students. When necessary, the research assistant asked for clarification during the interview. Teachers who had indicated they had a teaching partner were asked whether and in which manner they discussed their students’ well-being and behavior with their teaching partner.

*Students.* In the questionnaire, students who according to their self-reports were being victimized were asked whether they had told someone about their victimization. Students who answered that they had told someone, were then asked whom they had told about their victimization.

### *2.3.3 Perceptions of the prevalence of bullying*

*Teachers.* Teachers were provided with a list of names of the students in their classroom and were asked to mark victimized students.

*Students.* Teachers’ victim nominations were compared with their students’ self-reported victimization. The global victimization item of the Revised Olweus

Bully/Victim questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) was used to measure students' self-reported victimization. Before students reported on their victimization, they watched an instructional video in which a professional actress explained what bullying is. In this video, the core elements of bullying (i.e., systematic, power difference, intentional, and different forms) were emphasized (Olweus, 1993). Directly after watching the instructional video, students answered the following question: "Now that you know what bullying is, how often have you been bullied since the summer holidays?" (never – once or twice – two or three times a month – about once a week – several times per week). About 56.1% of the students indicated that they never had been victimized, 24.8% indicated that it had happened once or twice, 6.2% indicated that they had been victimized two or three times a month, 5.9% once a week, and 7% several times a week. Consistent with earlier studies, students were defined as victims when they indicated they had been victimized at least twice a month by their classmates (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Based on this definition 19.1% of the students (71 students) in the sample were victimized. Two students did not report on their victimization and had missing values.

### **3 Results**

#### **3.1 Teachers' definitions of bullying**

Even though the teachers in our study had been participating in the KiVa program for at least one year, and throughout the program the core elements of bullying were regularly emphasized (see Karna et al., 2011), none of the teachers provided a complete definition of bullying. The element 'systematic' was mentioned by nearly all teachers (86.4%), but the elements 'power difference' and 'intention to harm' were mentioned only a few times (both 13.6%). Less than half of the teachers (45.4%) mentioned that bullying can manifest itself in a variety of forms. Both physical and verbal bullying were mentioned by a majority of the teachers (both 73%). Teachers in the pilot study were thus aware that bullying can not only manifest itself by, for instance kicking or hitting, but also by name-calling. In line with previous studies (Asimopoulos et al., 2014; Boulton, 1997), relational bullying was mentioned less

frequently (50%) than physical and verbal bullying.

### **3.2. Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying**

About one-quarter of the teachers mentioned observing their students as a strategy to find out how their students are feeling. About three-quarters of the teachers in this study indicated they talked to their students (in private or in groups) to find out about their well-being. About 65% of the victimized students indicated they had told someone about their victimization. Of the students who had told someone about their victimization, almost all had told their friends or family members (97.9%). Only a few students (3.4%) indicated they had told their teacher about the victimization.

Most teachers with a teaching partner (86%) met in person to discuss their students' well-being and behavior. The other teachers indicated they never met in person because they worked on different days of the week and thus were not able to meet. Three (14%) teachers described that they discussed their students daily or at least in a structural way. The other teachers discussed their students' well-being and behavior only when problems occurred.

### **3.3 Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying**

The correspondence between teachers' victim nominations and students' self-reported victimization was low. Only one-quarter of all the self-reported victims were nominated by their teachers. Several teachers expressed doubt concerning whether their students were actually victimized and some teachers remarked that certain students felt victimized, but that these students were not actually being victimized.

*“Especially this one student... When another child just says something or pushes her a bit she reacts immediately... Exaggerates... Because she perceives it like that. They do not have a sense of proportion about this matter [bullying] yet.”(Teacher 5)*

*“Children often perceive it as bullying when someone is just teasing them. [In my classroom] nobody [is victimized] in a structural way.”* (Teacher 17)

*“I think there is almost no bullying in this school, but they [the students] perceive it differently...”*(Teacher 22)

Half of the teachers also nominated students who according to their self-reports were not victimized as victims. In general, the victim nominations of teaching partners showed little overlap. For example, one teacher did not nominate any student as victimized whereas the other teacher in the same classroom nominated four students as victimized.

## **4 Discussion**

The aim of this pilot study was to investigate to what extent elementary school teachers were prepared to tackle bullying. The results suggest that even though teachers are supposed to have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. It is disconcerting to find that even teachers who were participating in an anti-bullying program, and thus were likely to be better trained and informed than teachers in schools without such a program, gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom. However, due to the explorative character of this study, these findings must be interpreted tentatively. We hope that future studies will attempt replication of our findings using a larger representative sample. In the following sections we provide detailed suggestions for future research.

### **4.1 Teachers’ definitions of bullying**

Although all teachers in our study were participating in the KiVa anti-bullying program and throughout the program ample attention was given to the definition of bullying, none of the teachers could provide a complete definition of bullying. We

believe it is important that future studies follow-up on this finding and investigate whether teachers indeed do not have a clear understanding of what bullying is. In addition, we suggest that future studies investigate whether certain teachers (e.g., teachers with more teaching experience or who have a personal history of victimization) know better what bullying is than others. Finally, future studies could investigate whether and how teachers' incorrect or incomplete definitions of bullying can be changed. Bullying is most likely a topic with which most, if not all, teachers have at least some professional and personal experience (Huitsing, 2014). It is plausible that based on these experiences teachers have constructed beliefs on bullying that are not easily changed—not even by participating in an anti-bullying program. Perhaps teachers are more likely to consider new information about bullying when they are made aware that in the past years numerous studies have investigated school bullying, leading to a better understanding of this phenomenon with the consequence that certain earlier ideas on bullying became outdated (e.g., that bullying makes the victim stronger).

#### **4.2 Teachers' strategies to find out about bullying**

Perhaps because it is difficult to directly observe bullying (Craig et al., 2000; Fekkes et al., 2005) only a few teachers mentioned this as a strategy to find out how their students are feeling. Talking to students was more often mentioned as a strategy, but consistent with the study of Whitney and Smith (1993) most victimized students indicated that they did not inform their teacher about their victimization. Future studies can explore two solutions for this paradox. First, future studies could investigate ways to take away students' reluctance to inform their teacher about their victimization. Second, future studies may examine alternative strategies to find out about bullying. For instance, given that the victimized students in the pilot study were likely to talk to their friends and family members about the victimization, teachers would perhaps be more successful in finding out about bullying when they talk more often to victims' friends (within the school context) and victims' family members. Moreover, teachers who teach in the same classroom may be better informed when they discuss their students' behavior and well-being structurally. The need for

teaching partners to discuss their students regularly is underlined by the finding that teachers who taught in the same classroom did not perceive the same students as victimized.

### **4.3 Teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying**

We argue that when teachers do not perceive specific students as victimized, it is unlikely that they will intervene and help them. This pilot study suggests that teachers did not recognize their students' self-reported victimization. We suggest that future studies consider the following possible explanations for why teachers may not give victimization nominations to self-reported victims. First, teachers might be unaware of the victimization in their classroom. Second, students may over-report their victimization, for instance because they misperceive certain behavior as bullying (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Third, teachers may prefer to ignore the bullying or assure themselves (and the interviewer) that it is not really bullying. Teachers who are frequently confronted with bullying may feel they are not doing their job well and handle this perceived failure by denying that their students are being victimized (Bradley, 1978). In addition, future studies may investigate why teachers in the pilot study also gave victim nominations to students who according to their self-reports had not been victimized.

It is interesting that after the interviews some teachers were curious about the agreement between their perceptions of the victims in their classroom and the reports of the students. This indicates that the teachers were not fully sure about their own answers. Perhaps this curiosity could serve as a starting point for discussing the situation in the classroom with teachers. A coach could discuss teacher's victim nominations with the teacher and compare these with students' reports.

Focusing on the victimization of individual students rather than on the general prevalence of victimization in the classroom allows future studies to investigate both teacher and student characteristics that are possibly associated with the ability to recognize victimized students. For instance, the recognition of victimized students may depend on the form and frequency of the victimization. Moreover future studies could investigate whether teachers who provided more complete definitions of

bullying and used more effective strategies to find out about bullying were more likely to recognize victimized students. Finally, we suggest that follow-up studies should not only investigate whether teachers recognize victimized students but also whether they know who are the bullies of these students.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Teachers in this pilot study gave incomplete definitions of bullying, had limited strategies to find out about bullying, and did not recognize the self-reported victims in their classroom, suggesting that they may not be fully prepared to tackle bullying. Given the potential damage of bullying, we argue that it is important that this study is followed-up on and we provided some starting points for future research.

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