VICTIMIZED TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ABOUT TEACHER-TARGETED BULLYING BY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to gain insights into the bullying of teachers by their learners from the perspective of victims of teacher-targeted bullying by learners. This study followed a qualitative and descriptive research design stemming from semi-structured personal interviews with victims of teacher-targeted bullying. A thematic content analysis of the data generated from semi-structured personal interviews with six victimized teachers as a snowball sampling. The sample consisted of male (n=2) and female (n=4) participants from rural (n=3) and urban (n=3) school locations in Estonia. The focus of this study was to determine how the teachers who have experienced bullying by their students describe the nature, influence and reasons attributed to such bullying. The findings indicate that the victims of teacher-targeted bullying by students were exposed repeatedly over long time verbal bullying, ignoring the teacher and other threats and cyber-attacks directed against teachers, whereby line between learners' misbehavior at classroom and bullying behavior was recognized viewing bullying as group-based phenomenon. Bullying against teachers by pupils had a negative influence on the victims' teaching and learning, as well as their private lives; and victims perceived the lack of support from educational authorities.

Keywords: Teacher-targeted bullying, victimized teachers, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

In comparison with the international area of studies pertaining to school bullying and workplace bullying (Monks & Coyne, 2011), teacher-targeted bullying by students has received relatively little research attention. The term used to describe the bullying behavior of learners targeting the persons who are providing the knowledge is classified as Educator-Targeted Bullying or Teacher-Targeted Bullying (e.g. De Wet & Jacobs, 2006, De Wet, 2010, 2012; Kõiv, 2020; Ozkilic & Kartal, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998) and in this approach as teacher-targeted bullying (TTB) involves the bullying of teacher by student with the three central components of a bullying definition – repetition, intention and power imbalance require consideration in teacher-learner relations at school context.

More than two decades have passed since the publication of Pervin and Turner's (1998) report the challenges for schools to notice the existence of TTB is still alive, despite the fact that for the past ten years, there was a substantial increase in the prevalence of teacher targeted bullying (Kõiv, 2015). Previous international studies (in Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey) on the TTB have predominantly examined the problem in terms of nature, prevalence, negative effects and risk factors among teachers (quantitatively: Benefield, 2004; Billett, Fogelgarn, & Burns, 2019; De Wet, 2006; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Kõiv, 2015; Özkiliç, 2012; Özkilic & Kartal, 2012; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Santos & Tin, 2018; Uz & Bayraktar, 2019; Terry, 1998; Woudstra, Van Rensburg, Visser, & Jordaan, 2018; among teachers as victims of TTB (qualitatively: Bester, Du Plessis, & Treurnich, 2017; De Wet, 2010, 2012; quantitatively: Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a, 2012b; Kõiv, 2020), and also carried on via social media (qualitatively: De Wet, 2019). Although, teacher-directed violence is an issue analyzed in international arena (Longobardi et al., 2019) studies predominantly look at this phenomenon from the perspective of the teachers and only limited studies have focused on the teachers as victims' perspective.

Nevertheless, there is an agreement that adequate teaching and learning cannot take place when teachers are bullied by their learners (e.g. De Wet, 2010; Pervin & Turner, 1998). These challenges suggest that there is a need to gather data from victimized teachers reports about their experiences of TTB. Present study attempted to have a deeper focus on the personal experiences of schoolteachers from Estonia who were victims of learner bullying.

The aim of this study is to report on findings from a qualitative study on the teachers' subjective experiences and perceptions of having been victims of learner bullying in three areas: nature, influence

and reasons of the bullying of teachers by students. Research question was evoked: How teachers who were victims of learner bullying describe the teacher-targeted bullying at schools?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and sampling

This study followed a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design. The selection of the participants for this study was purposeful snowball sampling based on the fact they were victims of learner bullying at schools. The sample consisted of male (n=2) and female (n=4) participants from rural (n=3) and urban (n=3) school locations in Estonia. The mean age of the participants was 43 years (SD=4.21) ranging from 32 to 58-year old. The average number of years in the teaching profession for the participants was 22 years (SD=7.84).

2.2. Data collection

The questions were posed to the participants during the semi-structured interview based on questions developed from Pervin and Turner's (1998) measure of Teacher Targeted Bullying with focusing on participant's subjective experiences and perceptions in three areas – nature, influence and reasons attributed to teacher-targeted bullying.

The participants were contacted individually by the authors and after an informed consent process they agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview which was conducted at a neutral site outside the school environment. At the beginning of individual interview, a clear definition of bullying was presented (Kõiv, 2015) to help participants understand her/his perspective of bullying, which ensured the understandability of the research. Interviews were conducted until definite themes became evident and the information became saturated.

The ethical principles guided the study - confidentiality of the findings and protection of their identities, were explained to the educators. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, mutual trust and rapport were established. The individual interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one and half hour and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data gathered trough transcribed interviews in the evaluation of key words, meanings, and themes during the data analyze process: data were segregated, grouped, regrouped, and re-linked in order to unify meaning and explanation. Data (interview transcripts) and investigator triangulation (two researchers read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions) were used to strengthen the study.

3. Findings

Based on the aim of this research three main themes and ten subthemes emerged from the collected data.

Theme 1: Nature of TTB

Characteristics of TTB

Victimized participant teachers described bullying as "…a negative behavior that occurs repeatedly over time and causes distress" with characteristics of power imbalance between bully as a pupil and target as teacher. The aggressive acts against the teachers were described as intentional, repetitional and long-lasting – the duration of victimizations last more than half years or whole school year with still being victimized by learners.

Bullying as a phenomenon was described by participants as a hidden process without or refuse to use the term "teacher targeted bullying" showing hidden vulnerabilities among the victims of student bullying as reflection of negative meaning of this term.

I never named it – I found that it's just a bad behavior, although I felt the behavior was intentionally directed towards me. I didn't say that it is a teacher targeted bullying by a student. I said that young man is interrupting.

Forms of TTB

The transcript of victimized participants' interview shows that the participants in this study were victims of verbal bullying (teasing, name calling, shouting, mimicking), threatening of physical (e.g. throwing school supplies) abuse, gesture bullying (threatening signs, dirty looks), exclusion (leaving out physically, ignoring on purpose), relational (gossiping, whispering, spreading rumors), and cyber bullying (visual and text messages) with verbal abuse and ignoring as the most prevalent forms. Victimized participants also described that TTB takes form of several manifestations of learner repeated disruptive behavior as breaking discipline rules in the classroom.

Context of the TTB

The victims of TTB describe bullying as a group-based phenomenon as group of students repeatedly behave in an adversarial way that undermines or harms the teacher during lessons. Teachers perceived that leaders of the peer group started aggressive acts toward them to gaining attention and gratification from other peers and being supported by bystanders in group context.

He indicated that he would not accept me as a teacher, refused to work, interrupted constantly in the lesson. He had many followers, he was the leader in the group. Peers laughed, went along with him and it was impossible to continue with the lesson…

Teachers as victims were targeted in the classroom during regular lessons, but also outside regular lessons by cyberbullying, whereby being bully-abused by both girls and boys.

Theme 2: Influence of TTB

Influence of TTB on victims' personal characteristics

From the interviews with victimized teachers, it became clear that they often feel helpless, feeling guilty, anger, humiliation in addressing acts of TTB. Also, the negative outcomes for the participants were connected to negative career implications and also with workplace and family stress. Many victimized teachers believed that their personal and work-related reputation and authority were damaged.

The positive personal outcomes included a belief of respondents that the experience of taking effective action against the TTB had some personal worth or value for improving self-confidence and suggestions for future self-assertion strategies and skills to prevent or intervene in bullying incidents.

I went in confidently and said that you will listen to me assertively. Afterwards we got along very well.

The influence of TTB on the teaching practice

Several participants pointed out that their estimation of the teaching profession has changed as a result of their own negative experiences and victims have questioning their own professional abilities as a result of their victimization. Victims of TTB expressed that they started to use more passive strategies for handling the TTB with lowering their expectations in terms of behavior and teaching activities toward the learners who bullied them. As a result, they stared purposely ignore misbehavior of bullies in the classroom.

Theme 3: Reasons for TTB

Personal reasons

The participants paid attention to the personal risks connected with TTB as being easily provoked or intimidated by the perpetrators. The effects on the personal vulnerability of the TTB expressed in different ways. In some cases, participants acknowledged that they can be is easily irritated as some learners purposely bully them, and if they lose his/her temper it brings him/her into disrepute with the principal. In some cases, it even resulted in the suspension of classes – when the teacher as victim of TTB lost his/her temper then he/she stopped teaching. In some cases, according to notions of participants, students often "run" to the class teacher and complain about the minor academical or methodological "mistakes" of teacher in classroom practice. Victimized teachers expressed the feelings of powerlessness describing learners who bully them internationally trying to disempower them.

I understood that no one else couldn't solve this problem - this was the turning point. This was only a temporary solution and it shows me being even more weak, incompetent - she can't handle the situation by her own and has to ask somebody to help.

Reasons connected with students

Several participants mentioned that the negative attitude towards teachers and negative attitude toward schoolwork of student perpetrator is a risk for them for TTB victimization. Students partial or missed control over their learning outcomes with experiences of boredom was mentioned as the other reasons why learners bully their educators.

Student bullied because of boredom. He did his own thing because he found that studying is pointless. Now he went to other school and bullies teachers there.

Family related reasons

Parents' unwillingness to discipline their children at home and parents' negative attitudes towards teachers with justifying the aggression may be seen as purpose of TTB by present study participants. The victimized teachers believed that parents often reinforced such teacher targeted bullying behavior by not teaching children to take responsibility for consequences of their behavior. Also, the participants described and believed that bullies use a third party, such as their parents and his principal to bully them.

Parents do not admit that their child has done something wrong, they do not understand and they rather see that their child is being bullied by the teacher.

Institutional reasons

All victim-participants believed that the young and inexperienced of teachers may be purpose for TTB with mentioning that victimization may occur often when teacher is a beginner or the new at school. A half of the participants suggested that the listening and care attitude of their colleagues with

suggestions to discipline perpetuates of the TTB help them understand the situation and find self-management skills to trickle with bullying. On the contrary, the half of the participants said that they received no support from their colleagues and school management team help them to manage with bullying incidences by changing the class they teach. On a professional level participants' felt unsupported by school management team and teaching authorities. In some cases, the teachers were so overwhelmed by the bullying act that they felt compelled to leave the teaching profession as the negative impact on the victims' further career paths.

The school management usually do not understand - they do not comprehend that the teacher is being bullied. They think that teacher cannot maintain discipline. Officials in the educational field also do not understand – they speak about bullying between pupils, not teacher-targeted bullying by pupils.

Reasons connected with attitudes in society

The participants paid attention to the impact of broad societal reasons of the TTB. It was suggested by the participants that a lack of positive values in the community and in the educational authority level may be seen as underlying causes of the TTB with mentioning disregard or distort the phenomenon of TTB mainly though social media as blaming victims for their plight. At one side, majority of victimized teachers perceived that TTB is a very serious problem at the society and believed that this problem should be made public. At the other side, majority of victimized teachers perceived this phenomenon as a part of workplace context without possibilities to eliminate it completely.

...it doesn't matter what age or sex the bully is - it is like part of life - the bullying.

4. Discussion

This study focused on teachers who were victims of learner bullying and an analysis of the data generated from personal interviews with Estonian participant revealed that victimized teachers' conceptualization of the phenomenon of teacher-targeted bullying consists three central components – repetition, intention and power imbalance in teacher-learner relationship, accepting researchers definitions of bullying (e.g. Kõiv & Aia-Utsal, 2019), but victimized teachers tended to not use the term "teacher-targeted bullying" as a result of its negative and stigmatized characteristic.

In accordance with previous research (Wet, 2006, 2010; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a; Kõiv, 2015, 2020; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Santos & Tin, 2018; Terry, 1998; Woudstra et al., 2018) this study found that victims of TTB were exposed repeatedly over long time to verbal, non-verbal, indirect (e.g. exclusion) and physical abuse during regular classroom, whereby this study specifies results in the area of social context – the TTB was carried out by group of pupils; and learners disruptive group-based behavior may develop into the TTB if the misbehaving learners were perceived as willfully challenging the educators' authority in order to disempower them. Corroboratively, Kauppi, and Pörhölä (2012a) revealed that learners who willfully bully or victimize their teachers are basically trying to disempower them. Because the TTB bullying is rooted in both power dynamics (learner(s) achieve greater power over the teacher) and group dynamics within the peer group, there is an urgent need of peer group-level interventions for preventing TTB.

Through reflection participants identified influence of the TTB to their own personality and teaching styles and disciplinary strategies. Following previous studies (e.g. Billett, Fogelgarn & Burns, 2019; Woudstra et al., 2018) the TTB victimization experiences undermine teachers' confidence and authority as well as had the negative impact on the mental health of teachers.

Present study confirmed previous (De Wet, 2010; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Kõiv, 2019; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Özkiliç, 2014; Özkilic & Kartal, 2012; Santos & Tin, 2018) works that victims of TTB had used more ignoring and passive strategies for handling the TTB cases with lowering their expectations in terms of co-operation and academic output toward learners who bullied them. The study data reveal not only negative, but also positive outcomes for the participants as improvement of self-confidence and self-assertion skills after effective handling bullying by taking action against the learners who bully them in the classroom. Also victimized teachers received some emotional support and consultation from colleagues to handle the TTB cases supporting previous (Billett, Fogelgarn, & Burns, 2019; De Wet, 2014; Kõiv, 2020; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012a; Pervin & Turner, 1998; Özkilic & Kartal, 2012; Woudstra et al., 2018) studies, but teachers as victims of student targeted bullying were highly vulnerable group with needs to have a sufficient support social network from school management teams and educational authorities.

The reasons for the TTB, as identified by the TTB victimized teachers, were found on the personal (teachers' vulnerability and students' negative attitudes and feeling of boredom), social group (school as institution and informal family group) and societal level supporting multi-level risk factors structure and essence of the TTB (De Wet, 2012) with highlights the importance of educational policies and practices regulating safety in schools to ensure productive learning environments and the need for full awareness of the phenomenon of TTB in society for improving social support networks in schools and in communities to prevent TTB.

However, the TTB is a real issue in real (school)life and deeper understanding of teachers' bullying experiences, their interpretations of the causes of bullying, and of how they were influenced by these experiences, may be a basis of better understanding of the problem in order to contribute to multilevel bullying prevention at school.

Limitations of the study are connected with the nature of qualitative research – a relatively small sample of participants and limitation of the generalizability of the findings gathered in this study. Also, there were ethical limitations connected with the difficulties to find participants as a reflection of challenges for socially sensitive research area.

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