

# The Role of Prevention in Deterring Teachers Bullied by Students

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## Abstract

Few past studies discuss the subject of bullying by students with their teachers as targets. Examining preventative measures to gain a more thorough understanding of the complex, behavioral issue needs to be addressed. As a starting point the purpose of this study is to examine the scope of the problem as well as the various preventative initiatives with an added focus on clear rules, classroom management and consequences along with application while proposing that higher education be the educational sector that takes the leadership role in a community approach to diminish the problematic behavioral issue of teacher's being bullied by students.

**Keywords:** teacher-targeted bullying, bullying, classroom management, student behavior, and teacher stress

## 1. Introduction

Teachers are being bullied by students. Solving the problem is complex as is identifying the bullies before their behavior escalates. One study reports that almost 50% of teachers bullied experienced a single pupil as the aggressor; however this is not consistently the case (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). Bullying is part of the violence equation that occurs in schools globally (Nansel et al., 2003). School violence makes headlines and the increasing incidences have administrators, teachers, counselors and all of the general public concerned with the escalation (Sheley & Wright, 1995). The Los Angeles Times June 3, 2016 headline "UCLA Shooting Updates" was about a student that shot and killed his teacher (2016). Bullying is a behavioral problem and a form of aggression that is part of the larger picture of school violence (Olweus, 1994). The general public becomes aware of the extremes of unchecked behavioral issues in students when it escalates to make headline news. Teachers often do not talk about their experiences of being bullied by students, yet many teachers have experienced it. According to Australian researcher Marilyn Campbell, sometimes school administrators do not wish to accept there is a problem with school bullying (Campbell, 2005). Formal policies and procedures are lacking in many schools to uncover and address behavioral issues such as bullying.

It is time to bring this issue to a higher awareness and join together as educators to create preventative strategies to curb bullying, and higher education needs to lead by example. Since the act of bullying is considered a "subjective process" it is hard to substantiate (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2010). This explains why it is often not reported and why it is not addressed. Bullies crave control and want to exercise power over both people and the circumstances (Goodman, 2009). This is where the problem first surfaces for the teacher in regards to classroom management. Obviously the teacher must maintain control of the classroom to establish an acceptable learning environment for all students. There is a relationship between school shootings and bullying, so exploring the topic of bullying regardless of who the victim is, must be considered essential. Teachers experience genuine fear in the classroom (Dworkin, Haney, & Williams, 1988). This review of bullying with a focus on teachers as the targets will recommend actions for prevention with a focus on classroom management and policy with the suggestion for the higher education community to lead the change.

## 2. Method

This is an examination of the research and literature on the issue of teachers bullied by students. The study is based on secondary sources. Qualitative methodology was implored in approaching the analysis of the relationship and topic studied in regard to investigating teachers bullied by their students. The author investigates earlier research in the areas of school violence, and behavioral problems associated with bullying, with a focus on teachers bullied by students. Research was gathered from sources of scholarly journals, books, newspaper

articles, dissertations, university websites, and internet sources. A focus on the investigation of international journal research sources was employed. This research review and derived suggestions for change will prove interesting for educators embroiled in this sensitive issue.

### 3. Results

This work contributes to the school bullying literature by adding further insight into the area of prevention processes and their success in learning institutions. Furthermore it demonstrates that prevention techniques have been proven effective and adds to the body of work addressing teacher bullying while offering suggestions to prevent future crises. The findings provide insight into the problem, characteristics of bullies and offers strategies to address, and control the problem. Classroom management is explored as a strategy to deter bullying behavior along with the author advocating clear rules and consequences. The author concludes that higher education is best equipped to take the leadership role on this issue, and by enacting a worldwide community approach a positive difference will be accomplished.

While there are few statistics on it, and limited research, past studies have garnered statistics that report 80 percent of teachers have experienced some degree of bullying from students (Espelage et al., 2013). Research indicates that bullying behaviors occur as early as kindergarten (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001). In higher education bullying continues to be prevalent in many forms including the newest trend of cyber bullying (Washington, 2015). Since the studies have been limited and often occurring in Scandinavian and European countries it is hard to confirm that this trend is growing but in viewing reports from 2005 and in 2013 it can be concluded that the teachers report a 50 percent increase in experiencing bullying from students. In 2005 one study indicated that almost 25% of educators experienced being bullied (Malinauskiene, Obelenis, & Sopagiene, 2005). Ensuring that teachers are safe and that both the students and teacher have optimum experiences is essential for learning (Split, 2011). There has not been enough recent reliable statistical research to evaluate the real numbers or incidences of teachers being bullied by students, although prior research confirms it exists. Further research would need to be done to determine if teachers are simply reporting it more, or if the wider scope of research explains this.

Shocking news stories bring the scope of how violent behavior can progress into students arming themselves with the intent to do harm (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). A relationship has been established between school shootings and bullying. The shooters in the widely publicized Columbine school shooting reported being bullied and the attack was their revenge acted out. In analyzing the Columbine incident along with 15 incidents of school violence, researchers found that certain forms of ostracizing including bullying were involved in the majority of these attacks (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Headlines regarding school violence have most of us concerned and distressed by increasing incidences (Sheley & Wright, 1995). However for teachers who are in the trenches the dilemma often confronted is how best to balance the needs behaviorally troubled students while still creating an optimum learning experience for all students. Studies have revealed that bullying and violence among students is related and that bullying can be the cause of behavioral issues including aggression (Olweus, 1994). Educators must develop methods to address this issue so all students can experience a positive, and safe learning environment while promoting an atmosphere that is free from fear for the teacher.

What we do know about school bullies is that those who target teachers usually target their peers as well, and they tend to be male (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). One pattern that emerges regarding the profile of a bully is that about half of bullies were also bullied themselves and that group is more prone to dangerous behavior (Scott, 2008). This indicates this is a learned behavior, and it is a behavior pattern that can start at a very young age and progress into a problematic and disturbing behavior. Author Betsy Evans suggests that bullying begins in pre-school (Evans, 2011). While the majority of bullying incidences typically involve a single perpetrator, sometimes they involve a group. "Mobbing" is a term coined by researcher Kenneth Westhues, in regards to a specific type of bullying which refers to a group action of two or more participants (Westhues, 2004). The stress levels that teachers experience when bullied by a group can be significantly more troubling. To simplify what the main characteristic of a bully is can be surmised as aggressiveness towards others (Olweus, 1994). What makes a bully is an ongoing research topic but for educators preventing and controlling their behavior in order to create the best learning environment is the goal.

To deter this problem all schools and especially higher education must foster an environment in which students, and staff can work and study without fear or intimidation. Dan Olweus the expert research in the studying of bullying, advocates sanctions as part of the prevention plan along with "clear rules" (Olweus, 1994). In reviewing what higher educational institutions are doing to combat the problem of bullying not only with teachers as the targets but to include all students and staff, several universities polices on bullying were looked at.

There do not appear to be statistics gathered from prior researchers on how many universities have such policies either internally or posted for open access. However several U.S. Universities have anti-bullying policies that can be found on their websites such as University of Wisconsin, University of Southern Mississippi, New York University, California State Northridge, and the University of New Mexico to name a few. Many universities do not have a written anti-bullying policy or have not published it for access. However the majority of policies reviewed does not define student behavior or consequences but create a mix of workplace bullying and the definitions do not specifically address student bullying or sanctions. In preventing bullying at the higher education level expectations of student conduct must be clearly addressed and the consequences must be apparent. For a behavior modification to occur with disruptive students sanctions need to be imposed (Olweus, 1994). Both rules and consequences must be a significant part of any prevention plan for it to be successful. Of the policies reviewed one stands out as getting it right and that is the New York University. From the New York University website their policy on bullying, threatening, and other disruptive behavior guidelines they clearly state their purpose “Academic communities exist to facilitate the process of acquiring and exchanging knowledge and understanding, to enhance the personal and intellectual development of its members, and to advance the interests of society” (New York University, n.d.). Next the policy goes on to clearly define the behavior by written illustrations followed by how the university will respond and how they will impose penalties and sanctions. The importance of setting regulations and policies in regards to bullying and other disruptive behaviors cannot be overstated; along with consistent follow through by imposing sanctions is the optimum path for success in tackling the bullying issue in schools, weather that is in kindergarten or in higher education. Stopping the escalating behaviors in grade school would reduce the problem in higher education environment. Categorizing bullying and disruptive behavior has been done by many researchers, but the example and description from New York University is perhaps the gold standard. From the New York University website retrieved policy on bullying, threatening, and other disruptive behavior guidelines, this is their example of disruptive behavior:

**Academic Disruption/Interference:** behaviors that, by virtue of their intensity and/or repetitiveness, interfere with an academic activity (e.g., class, advising session, lecture, workshop) such as: persistently talking without being recognized; creating noise that obstructs the learning process; repeatedly interrupting others; maliciously or inappropriately mocking or ridiculing another’s work or comments; speaking in an abusive or derogatory manner; engaging in acts of physical aggression (e.g., causing or threatening injury, physical or verbal intimidation, damaging personal/University property, throwing items), or deliberately engaging in other behaviors that have the effect of compromising the learning process (New York University, n.d.).

This is likely the best definition of what the bullying problem encompasses, especially when referring to classroom and learning disruption which is the center issue of teacher bullying situations as well as peer bullying in the educational environment. Saying no to bullying involves defining the issue, implementing tough strategies, managing the classroom, and encompassing consequences. This will result in a more productive learning environment. Managing classroom behavior when teachers have one or more student’s intent on controlling the class and exhibiting disruptive behavior is the key to managing a bullying situation, whether the bully’s target is the teacher or peers. Recent media attention has been apparent in elevating the issue of bullying however not enough research has been conducted regarding how teachers manage classrooms, to control bullying and considerations of whether teachers are equipped to effectively address bullying problems through classroom management techniques (Allen, 2010).

Controlling the classroom is the goal of classroom management, and likely where the power struggle begins for the bully. In reviewing Goodman’s definition of the bully’s intention, she states that they crave control and want to exercise power over both people and the circumstances (2009). Teachers can enact several strategies to control disruptive behavior. The behaviors often seen and identified in the New York University policy on bullying are “persistently talking without being recognized; creating noise that obstructs the learning process; repeatedly interrupting others; maliciously or inappropriately mocking or ridiculing another’s work or comments; speaking in an abusive or derogatory manner” (New York University, n.d.). Controlling the classroom and avoiding bullying has been linked (Rowan, 2007). Some teachers who have experienced bullying in the classroom believe tactics in classroom management can prove effective; methods such as passing out a pop quiz as soon as the students enter the room keeps the bully from taking the initial control they desire, as can utilizing videos and creating recorded video animated lessons to deter the interrupting behaviors. Teaching through a method of utilizing group activities that involve mixing up the group members and seating locations is a strategy that works as well as creating a syllabus that includes points for participation that are detailed with clear expectations for

respectful behavior and an intolerance for behaviors that obstruct learning such as mocking, outbursts, repeated interruptions, leering and refusal to participate in group activities. The duties of constantly planning for the bully's disruptions by devising classroom management techniques that work are often stressful for the teacher due to the time involved. Hastings has researched the stress factor link to the burnout of teachers due to disruptive behavioral issues (2003). Support from administration in setting clear policies is necessary. Requesting a student leave the classroom if their behavior is deemed disruptive by the teacher should be part of standard protocol, along with policy based sanctions that deduct grade points for creating distractions in the learning environment.

Classroom management is only one strategy proposed to control bullies, policy and rules for behavior must also be integrated if we are to prevent bullying. The pilot study of author Shewanna Conner Buchanan defines classroom management in this way "Preventive, group based approaches to management provide a basis for teachers to plan and organize classroom activities and behaviors" (Buchanan, 2013, p. 1). Classroom management is basically the utilization of techniques and skills incorporated to maintain order and a productive learning environment. Further research on how we provide teachers with the specific skills necessary to cope with bullies, and especially in higher education needs to be explored. All students deserve an optimum learning experience that is focused on their learning needs. Teachers should not be afraid of their students or have to spend an inordinate amount of time focused in classroom management rather than in subject learning. Prevention strategies are recommended to diminish bullying behavior in all schools.

Preventive strategies need to be viewed as a long term commitment according to a recent study where preventative programs aimed at decreasing bullying showed potential for success (Smith, Salmivalli, & Cowie, 2012). Dan Olweus clearly demonstrated that prevention programs are effective and advocated increasing knowledge of the problem, increasing engagement of the school community, setting "clear rules" and developing systems to back and safeguard victims (1994). Subsequent findings conducted by Newman-Carlson and Horne showed that increasing teacher's skill levels as an intervention, served to accomplish preventing bullying behaviors (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). The information and research on bullying prevention programs shows that intervention, and prevention strategies are working.

#### **4. Discussion**

This accelerating issue needs more attention by teachers, administrators and the educational community at large. Little research has been done that specifically addresses solutions to controlling this problem. Classroom management along with well defined policies that include enforcement and sanctions supported by the higher education community are recommended as the best aggregated strategy to combat bullying in all schools. Violence in our schools may be a component of bullying but bullying is more narrowly defined, and encompasses things like name calling and espousing false accusations (Baldry & Farrington, 1999). When the teachers are victims of false accusations, mocking and name calling it can particularly stressful. One consequence of teachers being bullied by their students is that they are actually leaving their positions due to "emotional exhaustion" (Chang, 2009). Teacher burnout is often related to educators not being able to adequately control disruptive behaviors in the classroom (McCormick & Barnett, 2011). While classroom management can go a long way in controlling some of the bully behaviors, the effort it takes to create curriculum that deters interruptions and outbursts can add an additional layer of stress, and eventually takes its toll on the teacher. A strong recommendation for a widely accepted standard three- step approach involving classroom management, policy and consequences is advised. Higher education institutions like Western Governor's University have created a "student conduct officer" position, which serves to investigate and recommend sanctions (Western Governor's University website, 2016). Approaching this issue through discussions on what is effective through global team networking among schools has the hope of deterring the problem. Together we can offer solutions if this topic is a key focus of educators worldwide. According to researchers Carney and Merrell if we hope to diminish bullying we must all join together to accomplish this (2001). Higher education should lead this initiative as they have more resources and the wide range of experts needed to carry out this task. By involving other learning institutions and taking a team approach forward movement can occur in solving this issue.

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