

# Teacher-Student Discordance in Perceptions of Bullying

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## Introduction

- Perceptions of bullying and reports of its prevalence often differ based on the informant, and teachers tend to report lower rates of bullying than students (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Holt, Keyes, & Koenig, 2011).
- Discrepancies in reports of bullying may be explained by several factors, including different definitions of bullying (Naylor, Cowie, Crossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006), the fact that bullying often occurs when adults are not around, and differences in perceptions toward bullying (Swearer & Cary, 2001).
- Despite these discrepancies, Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007) found that students and teachers had similar perceived levels of concern relating to bullying, with a higher percentage of middle school teachers reporting these concerns than elementary and high school teachers.
- From a social-ecological standpoint, teachers and other adults (e.g., caregivers) play a vital role in establishing an environment that does not permit bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010).
- Studies are warranted that examine the discordance between teacher and student perceptions of bullying with a variety of populations and settings.
- The current study investigated student and teacher perceptions of bullying at the secondary level with a rural sample.

### Research Questions:

- Are there significant differences between teachers' and students' a) attitudes toward bullying, b) reports of how well school staff took care of the bullying, c) reports of whether bullying is a problem in their school, and d) beliefs about whether schools should worry about bullying?
- Do students' attitudes toward bullying differ based on bully/victim status?
- Do students' reported impact resulting from being bullied and from bullying others predict their attitudes toward bullying?
- Do verbal and physical forms of bullying predict students' attitudes toward bullying?

## Method

### Participants

- Participants were students and teachers in a combined middle and high school in the rural Midwest.
- The total sample consisted of 285 students (51.1% male and 48.9% female) and 39 teachers (82.8% female and 17.2% male).
- The majority of the student sample was Caucasian (87.1%). The remaining sample was 5.9% Latino/Hispanic, 5.1% Biracial/Other, 1.5% African American, and .4% Asian. The majority of the teacher sample was Caucasian (96.6%), with only one teacher (3.4%) reporting that he/she was Biracial/Other.
- Students in grades 6-8 participated (30.1% in grade 6, 35.7% in grade 7, and 34.2% in grade 8).
- The teachers had an average of 13.26 years of teaching experience.

### Measures

- The Bully Survey- Student Version* (BYS; Swearer, 2001)
- The Bully Survey- Teacher Version* (BYS-T; Swearer, 2001)
- Bully Attitudinal Scale* (BAS; Swearer, 2001)
- Bullying Impact Scale* (Swearer, 2001)
- Verbal and Physical Bullying Scale* (VPBS; Swearer, 2008)

### Procedure

- Participants completed the measures online using Survey Monkey.
- Teachers were asked to consider the student body as a whole and students were asked to refer back to their own experiences with bullying.

## Method (continued)

### Data Analyses

- A Welch's test of proportions was conducted to examine teacher and student differences on dichotomously coded items. It is preferable to use this statistic with unequal sample sizes and when the equality of population variances cannot be assumed.
- Confidence intervals were used to determine differences on students' BAS scores based on their bully/victim status. Non-overlapping confidence intervals indicate significant differences between groups on mean BAS scores.
- Cohen's d values were calculated to measure the effect of being in each bully/victim status group (when compared to uninvolved youth) on mean BAS scores.
- Regression analyses were used to evaluate whether students' reported impact from being bullied and from bullying others predicted their attitudes toward bullying, and to assess whether students' verbal and physical bullying predicted their attitudes toward bullying.

## Results

- In the student sample, there were 24 bullies, 82 victims, 42 bully-victims (self-reported as a bully and a victim), 82 bystanders, and 45 uninvolved. Ten cases were missing.
- In the teacher sample, there was one bully, 10 victims, one bully-victim, and 17 bystanders/uninvolved. Ten cases were missing.

### Student and Teacher Differences on Bullying Attitudinal Scale (BAS)

- An independent samples t-test revealed that teachers ( $M = 22.21$ ,  $SD = 4.601$ ) were less supportive of bullying than students ( $M = 24.73$ ,  $SD = 7.71$ ),  $t(47) = 2.59$ ,  $p = .013$ .

### Reports of How Well Staff Responded to the Bullying

- A Welch's test of proportions revealed that a significantly higher proportion of teachers ( $M = .65$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) than students ( $M = .29$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) felt that staff responded in a satisfactory manner to the bullying students had perpetrated  $t(43) = -3.31$ ,  $p = .002$ .

### Reports of Whether Bullying is a Problem

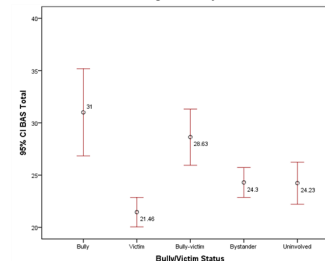
- A significantly higher proportion of teachers ( $M = .79$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) than students ( $M = .58$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) reported that bullying was a problem in their school  $t(37) = -2.54$ ,  $p = .016$ .

### Reports of Whether Schools Should Worry About Bullying

- A significantly higher proportion of teachers ( $M = .97$ ,  $SD = .19$ ) than students ( $M = .85$ ,  $SD = .36$ ) reported that schools should worry about bullying,  $t(54) = -2.85$ ,  $p = .006$ .

### Student Differences in Attitudes Toward Bullying Based on Bully/Victim Status

Figure 1. Students' BAS Scores According to Bully/Victim Status



## Results (continued)

Table 1. Confidence Intervals and Effect Sizes for BAS Scores

Bully/Victim Status	95% CI		d
	Lower limit	Upper limit	
Bullies	26.83	35.17	.95
Victims	20.05	22.86	-.39
Bully-Victims	25.95	31.32	.62
Bystanders	22.87	25.72	.01

Note. Effect sizes were calculated by comparing BAS scores of the above bully/victim status groups to the uninvolved group.

- Of note is the high effect size for bullies and the moderate effect sizes for victims and bully-victims when compared to uninvolved youth, 95% CI [22.22, 26.24].

### Impact of Bullying and Attitudes Toward Bullying

- Students' scores relating to the extent to which the bullying they perpetrated was a problem for them significantly predicted their scores on the BAS ( $\beta = -.334$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Approximately 11% of the variance of the BAS scores was accounted for by students' self-reported impact.
- However, students' self-reported impact of being victimized did not significantly predict BAS scores ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .186$ ).

### Verbal and Physical Bullying and Attitudes Toward Bullying

- A linear regression analysis revealed that students' perpetration of verbal bullying significantly predicted their attitudes toward bullying ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for approximately 20% of the variance ( $R^2 = .197$ ). Both predictors accounted for 35% of the variance in BAS scores ( $R^2 = .35$ ), which was highly significant,  $F(2, 62) = 16.43$ ,  $p < .001$ .
- When physical bullying was added to this model it uniquely explained 15% ( $R^2$  change = .149) of the variance over and above verbal bullying.

## Discussion

- Results of this study indicated that teachers were generally less supportive of bullying and viewed it as more of a problem than students. The findings contradict results of other studies demonstrating that reports of bullying are higher among students than teachers.
- Unsurprisingly, students who perpetrated bullying were the most supportive subgroup of bullying, while victims were the least supportive.
- Bullying perpetration may play a larger role in predicting attitudes toward bullying than victimization.
- This study is unique in that data were collected in a rural setting.
- Additional research is warranted to examine differences among teachers' attitudes toward bullying based on their own experiences with bullying as well as unique teacher and student responses and attitudes to bullying in rural populations.
- Seasoned teachers may be more aware of bullying and/or more willing to intervene than less experienced teachers.
- Teacher preparation programs that incorporate accurate information about bullying, as well as prevention and intervention strategies, are sorely needed (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). These training programs are fertile ground for informing teachers about how to respond to bullying behaviors effectively and consistently.

### Limitations

- Small sample sizes limited the ability to compare teachers on indicators based on their retrospective bully/victim status.
- Drawing conclusions about discrepancies between the two samples is difficult because teachers were asked to consider the student body as a whole, while students' responses were based on their own individual experiences.
- Teachers may have endorsed socially desirable responses.