

The Relation between Peer Victimization and Self-Esteem:
An insight into the moderating effect of teachers' class management strategies

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Abstract

This study focused on the influence of active and passive teacher involvement during peer harassment, in the relation between peer victimization and pupils' self-esteem. The sample consisted of 554 fourth, fifth and sixth grade primary school pupils from schools located in The Netherlands. As expected, increases in peer victimization were indeed associated with decreases in pupils' self-esteem. However, neither active, nor passive teacher involvement had a moderating effect on the relation between peer victimization and self-esteem. Future research should address the limitations of this study, and take into account factors like the cultural diversity, victims' emotional state and incorporate teachers' self-evaluation of intervention frequency.

Bullying is regarded as a persistent problem and a frequently occurring phenomenon among pupils in most schools in The Netherlands (Mooij, Fettelaar, & De Wit, 2013). Specifically, bullying is defined as repeatedly being physically or verbally harassed, or being exposed to deliberate negative, antisocial or violent acts committed by others, while being incapable to defend oneself or remove oneself from the situation (Horrevorts, Monshouwer, Wigman, & Vollebergh, 2014; Olweus, 1993). Recent studies regarding bullying in The Netherlands have reported that approximately 16 percent of primary school pupils had admitted to being bullied in the past several weeks (Heuveln, Van der Gaag, & Duiven, 2012). Among these pupils, 20 percent reported being bullied on a daily basis, and on average, two thirds of the bullying was done by the victims' peers in class (Heuveln et al., 2012).

However, the bullying process in the classroom context does not simply constitute a bidirectional relationship between victim and aggressor, but rather refers to a group process as it involves every pupil in the classroom. This is elaborated upon with the participant role approach to bullying, which posits children may be involved in bullying actively by assisting the bully, or passively, by laughing or verbally encouraging the bullying behaviour (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Also, children may take it upon themselves to help the victim or may choose to stand by idly while still being exposed to the bullying behaviour. Thus, incidences of bullying in the classroom do not solely impact the victims and the bullies, but also convey to other pupils in the classroom. This notion underlines that bullying stretches far beyond the bully-victim dyad and therefore stresses the importance of reducing bullying by improving the classroom climate.

Peer relationships in the middle- to late childhood, which are often formed at school, play an essential part in the acquisition of social skills, identity formation and moral development (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Negative peer experiences, like victimization, have been associated with anxiety, loneliness, social adjustment issues, depression, low self-esteem, and academic failure (Olweus, 1993). Furthermore, teachers' beliefs about peer victimization, i.e., the extent to which pupils are bullied by peers, may influence the manner in- and the frequency of which they act on negative behaviour like peer harassment. For example, teachers who believe that peer harassment serves as an important life experience may opt to be unsupportive towards victimized pupils. Consequently, unsupportive strategies that teachers adopt to act on peer victimization may be incorporated into children's relational schemas over time (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010), resulting in long-term emotional difficulties, which are closely tied to declines in self-esteem (Ladd &

Troop-Gordon, 2003; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Furthermore, Olweus (1993) posited that internalizing difficulties both increase bullied children's risk of being victimized again, thus increasing detrimental consequences of peer victimization. These grave consequences of negative peer experiences, together with the notion that incidences of bullying impact observing pupils as predicated with the participant role approach to bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), thereby suggest the urgent need for insight into how bullying in the classroom context may effectively be reduced.

Recent studies have attempted to offer insights into teachers' responses to classroom bullying by examining either pupils' perceptions of teachers' actions regarding peer harassment (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010), or teachers' own beliefs about effective responses to classroom peer harassment (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2007; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2013). This study attempts to build on the foundation of previous research as only few studies have attempted to offer a more accurate assessment of how teachers may effectively intervene during episodes of classroom bullying. Teachers act as authority figures in the classroom context as they manage the degree to which (un-)desirable behaviour by pupils occurs (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2013). Recent findings have shown teachers report rates of peer harassment in class that are far lower than the rates reported by primary school pupils (Demaray, Malecki, Secord, & Lyell, 2013). These findings suggest that teachers, even when adopting effective strategies to negate peer harassment, may not always be aware of the frequency of bullying in their classrooms (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005), while pupils may feel they have to fend for themselves when their teachers fail to act on episodes of peer harassment (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). Indeed, previous research has posited teachers often overestimate their capacity to detect peer harassment in class as well as their effectiveness in properly managing classroom bullying (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). This study therefore focuses on the influence of pupils' perceptions of their teachers' responses to peer harassment, in the relation between victimized primary school pupils and their self-esteem.

Peer Victimization and Self-Esteem

Studies focusing on the impact of bullying on the victims' self esteem have consistently underscored the notion that bullied children have significantly lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children who have not been bullied (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Moreover, Ladd and Troop-Gordon (2003) signified that negative effects of peer victimization, like declines in victims' self esteem, are more evident and stable for children who experience more chronic forms of peer harassment as compared to children who experience sporadic or short-lived peer harassment. Adding to this notion,

longitudinal studies have posited that peer victimization perpetuates into late childhood and early adolescence (Boulton & Smith, 1994). It would therefore seem likely that the negative effects of peer victimization, particularly decreases in self-esteem, should remain stable, if not, increase among victimized children. That is, victimized children in their late childhood are not only likely to keep experiencing peer harassment as they get older (Boivin, Petitclerc, Feng, & Barker, 2010; Boulton & Smith, 1994), thus having a prolonged impact on their self esteem, but the severity of the peer harassment and the tarnishing of the victims' self esteem might both increase (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003). Moreover, late childhood is regarded a sensitive period for acquiring knowledge about peer experiences in relation to the self (Boivin et al., 2010). This signifies the importance of early indicators of peer victimization, as both the duration and the degree to which peer harassment occurs may have pronounced effects on the self-esteem of victims. However, this study does not focus on the causality of peer victimization and the impact on the self-esteem of children in their late childhood, as recent findings have shown peer victimization might both be an antecedent and a consequent of internalizing problems (Boivin et al., 2010). Based on the discussed literature, it is therefore expected that increases of peer victimization are associated with lower levels of self-esteem among Dutch preadolescents, i.e. fourth, fifth and sixth grade Dutch pupils (H1).

Teachers' Responses to Classroom Bullying

Teachers represent authority figures in the context of the classroom as they manage and influence pupils' behaviour (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2013). Troop and Ladd (2002) categorized teachers' beliefs about bullying into three categories. The first being assertive beliefs, which pertain to the notion that victimized pupils should stand up for themselves so that they would not be bullied, the second being avoidant beliefs, which entails that children would not be bullied if they avoided the aggressor, and the third constitutes the view that bullying is normative behaviour, meaning being bullied asseverates a learning experience for children in regard to the acquisition of knowledge about social norms. This signifies that teachers' inclinations to involve themselves in bullying behaviour among pupils are relative to their beliefs of what bullying entails for children and strategies they themselves deem effective.

In regard to pupils' perception of teachers' responses to peer harassment, Troop-Gordon and Quenette (2010) posited that active teacher responding (reprimanding class bullies, separating pupils or contacting pupils' parents) conveyed feelings of acceptance and involvement to victimized pupils, while passive teacher responding (indifference to peer harassment, encouragement to assert oneself or encouragement to avoid the aggressor)

conveyed feelings of rejection, helplessness and lack of self-efficacy. Troop and Ladd's (2002) assertive beliefs pertain to active teacher responding, while their definitions of avoidant and normative beliefs pertain to passive teacher responding. Active teacher responses are generally perceived by pupils as helpful. For example, teachers who feel competent in managing classroom bullying may adopt reprimanding sanctions towards classroom bullies when appropriate, by which they offer support to victimized pupils, which might diminish anxieties and fears related to bullying. Passive teacher responding suggests pupils should deal with the bullying on their own. If incapable to do so, pupils fending for themselves may feel helpless when being bullied. This notion could have profound negative effects on pupils' self esteem, especially when considering children show higher levels of internalizing problems when they blame themselves for harassment by peers (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Furthermore, teachers may overestimate their capacity to adequately intervene and detect classroom bullying (Yoon & Kerber, 2003), and they may choose different involvement strategies depending on the pupil involved (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). This study seeks to incorporate more objective assessments of teachers' responses to peer harassment. Therefore, pupils' perceptions of teachers' responses to peer harassment are incorporated in this study rather than teachers' self report of their involvement in incidences of classroom bullying. Specifically, it is hypothesized that teacher involvement would act as a moderator in the relation between peer victimization among pupils and victims' self esteem, with active teacher involvement abating the effects of increased peer victimization on victims' self esteem (H2a). In addition, it is hypothesized that teacher involvement would act as a moderator in the relation between peer victimization among pupils and victims' self esteem, with passive teacher involvement increasing the effects of increased peer victimization on victims' self esteem (H2b), further tarnishing victims' self esteem.

Current Study

This study seeks to add to the growing body of literature about relations pertaining to peer victimization and self-esteem, specifically, how teachers' may effectively respond to classroom bullying. Research pertaining to the relationship between bullying and self esteem is especially beneficial to pupils in their late childhood as anti bullying programs aimed at counteracting consequences of peer victimization have shown to be less successful for adolescents as compared to similar programs for primary school pupils in their late childhood (Smith, 2010). Indeed, Zettergren (2005) found that acquired peer status among primary school pupils remained stable during and after they transitioned into secondary school. Lower peer status in the late childhood may be a consequence of being bullied, thus leading to

decreased self esteem among bully victims (Fenzel, 2000), which consequently perpetuates into adolescence. This underlines the need for more insight in how bullying among pupils in their late childhood can effectively be reduced.

This study therefore focuses on pupils' perceptions of their teachers' responses to peer harassment and their role in the relation between victimization in fourth, fifth and sixth grade primary school pupils and their levels of self-esteem. First, based on the discussed literature, it is expected that increases of peer victimization are associated with lower levels of self-esteem among Dutch fourth, fifth and sixth grade Dutch pupils (H1). Second, it is expected that teacher involvement would act as a moderator in the relation between peer victimization and pupils' self esteem, with active teacher involvement abating the effects of increased peer victimization on victims' self esteem (H2a), and passive teacher involvement increasing the effects of increased peer victimization on victims' self esteem (H2b).

Current bullying statistics regarding the Dutch primary school classroom show to be roughly equivalent to statistics posited in other literature (see Olweus, 1993; Heuveln et al., 2012). This might be an asset to the generalizability of possible findings in this study, as the prevalence of peer victimization constitutes an equally important and relevant problem for other populations. Also, by examining the bullying dynamics in the classroom context, effective strategies to reduce the effects of peer victimization may be (re-)assessed.

Methods

Participants

The data for this study were obtained as part of a larger study pertaining to bullying behaviour in The Netherlands. Participants in this study were pupils recruited from ten different Dutch primary schools located in both urban and rural areas. The level of education ranged from the fourth to sixth grade. 13 Participants were excluded from further analysis because they had not completed the answers on one or more questions of interest for this study. Of the final number of participants for this study ($N = 554$; 271 female and 283 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.04$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.788$), 540 pupils were born in the Netherlands, one participant was born in Surinam, two were born in the Dutch Antilles, one was born in Morocco, four were born in an unspecified western country and four were born in another unspecified non-western country. The socioeconomic status (SES) of pupils was assessed with indicators of family wealth, which are labeled as low-, middle-, or high SES/affluence (Boyce, Torsheim, Currie & Zambon, 2006). Of the total sample, 2.7% of pupils fell into the low SES/affluence

category, 23.8% of pupils fell into the middle SES/affluence category, and 73.5% of pupils fell into the high SES/affluence category.

Measures

All discussed questionnaires were translated to Dutch, back translated to English and again translated to Dutch by independent groups of research assistants to warrant the linguistic equivalence of the measures.

The socioeconomic status of pupils was determined by using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS), a self-report measure designed for pupils, consisting of four items (Boyce, Torsheim, Currie & Zambon, 2006). The measure addressed the social category of wealth of pupils' families and consisted of the following items: "Does your family own a car, van or truck?" (0 standing for 'no', 1 standing for 'yes', and 2 standing for 'yes, two or more'), "Do you have your own bedroom for yourself?" (0 standing for 'no' and 1 standing for 'yes'), "During the past 12 months, how many times have you traveled away on holiday with your family" (0 standing for 'not at all', 1 standing for 'once', 2 standing for 'twice' and 3 standing for 'more than twice'), and "How many computers/laptops/tablets does your family own?" (0 standing for 'none', 1 standing for 'one', 2 standing for 'two', and 3 standing for 'more than two'). Schnohr et al. (2008) reported that Cronbach alpha values for the FAS varied between samples from different countries, ranging for .20 to .60. The Cronbach's alpha in the sample of the current study was also low ($\alpha = .40$). These values are considered low to moderate, as the internal consistency of a measure is usually considered good when it exceeds a Cronbach's alpha value of over .70 (Field, 2009). However, a high correlation was found between the FAS and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which measures national wealth, and the criterium validity was shown to be good (Boyce et al., 2006).

Peer victimization of pupils was assessed using the Illinois Bully Scale (IBS) Victim subscale, a self-report measure, consisting of four items, designed for children with ages from 8 to 18 years old (Espelage & Holt, 2001). The measure addressed physical and verbal victimization by peers committed to the pupils (i.e. "Other students made fun of me") during the past 30 days (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Pupils reported the frequency of occurrence on a five point scale, with 0 standing for 'never' and 5 standing for '7 or more times'. The Cronbach's alpha for the Victim subscale in a previous study was .88 (Espelage & Holt, 2001), and the Cronbach's alpha value in the sample of the current study was .84, both indicating good reliability as both values were over .70 (Field, 2009).

Pupils' perceptions of teachers' intervention strategies were determined using the Perceived Teacher Response Scale (PTRS), which assessed the point of view of pupils when

witnessing teacher intervention strategies in the occurrence of peer victimization (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). Pupils rated with what frequency their teachers opted to use intervention strategies in the occurrence of peer harassment (i.e. “Tell students to stand up to the aggressor”). Pupils responded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*‘never’*) to 5 (*‘always’*). The PTRS was reduced to 20 instead of 24 items to more accurately represent teacher intervention strategies in the Dutch classroom context. The internal reliability of each subscale was considered to be moderately good: punishing aggressors ($\alpha = .70$), contacting parents ($\alpha = .88$), advocating avoidance ($\alpha = .71$), and advocating assertion ($\alpha = .65$) (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). In the current study, mean items from the subscales ‘punishing aggressors’ and ‘contacting parents’ were computed to represent active teacher involvement ($\alpha = .77$). Furthermore, mean items from the subscales ‘advocating avoidance’ and ‘advocating assertion’ were also computed to represent passive teacher involvement ($\alpha = .81$). The internal reliability values for both newly composed scales were considered acceptable (Field, 2009).

To assess pupils’ state of *self-esteem*, a Dutch version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used. The RSES consisted of ten items and required participants to reflect on their feelings at the time of data collection (i.e. “On the whole I am satisfied with myself”). Pupils responded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*‘strongly disagree’*) to 5 (*‘strongly agree’*). Reliability and validity of the RSES were considered to be good (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). In previous research, the RSES had a Cronbach’s alpha of .88 (Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2002). In the current study, the RSES had a Cronbach’s alpha of .82, which is considered acceptable.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to both pupils and teachers in class during regular class hours. All participants received brief verbal instructions by two research assistants, during which they were told that all questions could be directed to the research assistants and it was imperative that participants completed the questionnaires on their own. Furthermore, pupils’ parents were informed to grant permission before the questionnaires were administered and all participants were informed that they could end their participation at any desired time. The completion of the children’s questionnaires took 30 to 45 minutes. All participants were thanked after completion of the questionnaires, informed about the goal of the research, and all classes were presented with a gift.

Statistical Analysis

A data inspection was performed to check whether the data met the requirements for performing a multiple regression analysis. To test whether peer victimization and self-esteem were associated (H1), and to test for the possible interaction effect of active teacher intervention (H2a) and passive teacher intervention (H2b) in the relation between peer victimization and self-esteem, hierarchical regression analyses were performed. It was chosen to do a regression analysis because both the independent and dependent variables were of interval scale, and specifically a multiple regression analysis because there were multiple independent variables (the teacher intervention strategy variable, the peer victimization variable, and the interaction term). Hierarchical regression analyses were performed so that a model including only peer victimization as a predictor could be directly compared with a model that also included the main effects of teacher intervention and the interaction effects (i.e. the possible moderating effect of teacher intervention on the negative relation between peer victimization and self-esteem). The peer victimization variable was entered in the first step of the regression analysis and the teacher intervention and interaction variables were added in the second step.

Results

Data Inspection

All assumptions for doing a multiple regression analysis were met by the data. Homoscedasticity of the standardized residuals over the standardized predicted values applied, and the standardized residuals were normally distributed (see **Table 1** for an overview of descriptive statistics for all relevant variables). Multicollinearity statistics were within acceptable ranges (tolerance > 0.10 and VIF < 10).

Of the sample for this study, two participants did not specify their gender, two did not specify their age, and another two did not specify their country of birth, but none of these participants were excluded from further analyses as they had completed the answers for the relevant questions of this study.

Peer Victimization, Self-Esteem and Teacher Involvement

The mean of items of the subscales 'contacting parents' and 'reprimanding aggressors' of the Perceived Teacher Response Scale questionnaire were taken to represent the teacher's active intervention according tot pupils.

To determine the passive intervention scores of teachers according to pupils, the mean of items from the subscales 'advocating avoidance' and 'advocating assertion' of the

Perceived Teacher Response Scale were used. For peer victimization the items from the Illinois Bullying Scale Victim subscale were used to calculate a mean peer victimization score. All independent variables were centered before being subjected to the regression analysis to reduce multicollinearity and for a more meaningful interpretation of the intercept values obtained from the regression analysis. The interaction effect variable was obtained by multiplying the centered teacher intervention variable with the centered peer victimization variable.

To find out about the strength and direction of the relationship between peer victimization and teacher intervention with self-esteem, and to test for the moderating effect of active teacher intervention, and the moderating effect of passive teacher intervention in the relation between peer victimization and self-esteem, a hierarchical regression analyses was performed. Model 1, which included only peer victimization as a predictor accounted for a significant amount of variance in self-esteem scores, $F(1, 552) = 40.36, p < .001, R^2 = .068$. This is in support of H1, that increases in peer victimization are associated with declines in pupils' self-esteem scores. The simultaneous addition of the teacher intervention variables (both passive and active) and the interaction variables (both the passive teacher involvement by peer victimization and active teacher involvement by peer victimization terms) in the second step, however, did not result in a significant increase in explained variance and was therefore not included in the final model, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 548) = 1.20, p = .312, R^2_{\text{change}} = .008$. Therefore it can be concluded that neither active teacher intervention (H2a) nor passive teacher intervention (H2b) had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between peer victimization and pupils' self-esteem. The final model included only peer victimization as a relevant predictor of self-esteem scores. Namely, peer victimization had a significant negative effect on self-esteem scores, $b = -0.22, t(552) = 6.35, p < .001$, thus confirming H1, but not H2a and H2b.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the regression analyses.*

	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Active intervention	2.23	14.80	3.09	0.74	-0.23	-0.32
Passive intervention	3.13	14.80	3.01	0.77	-0.19	-0.25
Peer victimization	1.00	5.00	1.56	0.78	1.97	3.93
Self-esteem	1.00	5.00	4.00	0.66	-0.67	0.34

Discussion

This study addressed the effect of teachers' involvement during peer harassment, in the relation between peer victimization of fourth, fifth and sixth grade primary school pupils and their levels of self-esteem. The notion that increases in peer victimization are related to decreases in pupils' self esteem in the current study are in accordance with previous studies (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). However, neither passive nor active teacher involvement affected the relationship between peer victimization and self-esteem. It was expected that passive teacher involvement would further decrease pupils' self-esteem when bullying would increase. Passive teacher involvement entails indifference to peer harassment, encouragement to assert oneself or encouragement to avoid the aggressor, conveyed feelings of rejection, helplessness and lack of self-efficacy according to a previous study (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). Furthermore, it was expected that active teacher involvement would help diminish effects of peer victimization and increase victims' self-esteem. Active teacher involvement entails reprimanding class bullies, separating pupils or contacting pupils' parents and conveyed feelings of acceptance to victimized pupils according the previously mentioned study (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010). The findings in the current study did not support these notions. These findings could possibly be explained by the notion that pupils may not offer accurate views of their teachers' involvement in classroom bullying. For example, Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) have posited that emotional states may influence children's' social information processing and it is plausible that victimized peers already held more negative views of their teachers if they felt they were ineffective in their ability to intervene. Furthermore, Troop-Gordon & Quenette (2010) have pointed out in their study that peer victimization could elicit self-doubt among boys and feelings of helplessness among girls if they felt their teachers did not effectively intervene. However, it was not confirmed that these negative emotional states were antecedents or a consequences of their evaluation of their teacher, thus further research is recommended.

This study was not without its limitations. First, the degree of self-efficacy among teachers was not taken into account. Previous research has indicated that teachers who feel confident about their class management skills and judge themselves as effective in intervening during incidences of bullying are indeed more effective in reducing classroom bullying than teachers who do not, even when dealing with children who are sensitive to the effects of peer victimization (Gulmond, Brendgen, Vitaro, Dionne, & Boivin (2015). This study deliberately focused on pupils' evaluations of their teachers' class management, as it was pointed out in previous research that teachers often overestimate their abilities in regard to class

management (Demaray et al, 2013). Future studies could focus on both pupils' points of view and teachers' self-evaluation in regard to teacher involvement during classroom bullying. This could possibly offer a more accurate depiction of the degree to which teachers intervene during these incidences. Second, the generalizability of the findings of this study is limited despite the relatively large sample and demographic span in which the participating schools were located. There was little cultural diversity in our sample despite The Netherlands being known as a relatively multicultural country. In addition, the vast majority of participating pupils had families that belonged in the high socioeconomic status category. Thus indicating that the sample for the current study was not representative for the current Dutch population. Third, teachers may not always be aware of classroom bullying as overt bullying could more easily lead to reprimanding actions by teachers. Also, the fact that pupils themselves provided all data, could mean that they provided socially desirably answers to prevent the risk of exposing themselves or their classmates. To prevent for this, the research assistants did point out that all information would be treated confidentially, however the verbal elaboration of the research assistants on the confidentiality of research data may not have been enough to reassure all pupils.

In conclusion this study did add to the notion that the frequency of peer victimization is related to children's levels of self-esteem. Future research could address the previously mentioned limitations to offer more conclusive insights into the dynamics of classroom bullying and provide a framework of how bullying may effectively be reduced.

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