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Article

Teachers' Experiences With Difficult Bullying Situations in the School: An Explorative Study

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Abstract

Although anti-bullying programs often include a component that focuses on strengthening teachers' abilities in identifying and addressing bullying, it is not clear which bullying situations teachers find difficult to address and what type of support is needed. In the current qualitative study, we investigated what teachers considered difficult bullying situations, how they responded to these situations, and which barriers they encountered. We used data from individual in-depth interviews conducted with 38 Dutch elementary school teachers. Qualitative analysis showed that teachers experienced difficulties in (a) identifying bullying that happens out of sight, (b) estimating the seriousness of a reported incident, (c) addressing persistent aggressive and bullying behavior, and (d) finding solutions with parents to reduce bullying. Teachers used a variety of strategies in their efforts to address these situations. The results give insight into teachers' needs regarding specific training and support in anti-bullying programs and preservice teacher programs.

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Although a decline in the prevalence of bullying has been noticed in many countries across Europe and North America in the past decade, bullying is still a common problem in primary and secondary schools (Cosma & Hancock, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). School bullying is often defined as intentionally harmful behavior from one student toward another, includes an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim and happens repetitively (Olweus, 1993). The decline in bullying behavior in schools is most probably related to the development of anti-bullying programs and policies and their increased implementation in practice (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014).

Most positive outcomes have been achieved with programs that are based on the whole-school approach (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). These consist of multiple components, such as school-wide rules, classroom curricula, teacher training, and indicated actions for students involved in bullying situations (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015). These programs are founded on the social-ecological framework of bullying that takes the different contexts in which bullying occurs into account. The characteristics of the child, family, peers, school professionals, and the complex interplay between them, all influence the establishment and maintenance of bullying behaviors together with culture and values and norms within these contexts (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

Teachers play an important role in many programs aimed at reducing school bullying. They are responsible for the implementation of most program components (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Salmivalli, Poskiparta, Athola, & Haataja, 2013), and need to adequately identify and respond to bullying situations (Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011; Kochenfelder-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Migliaccio, 2015). Teachers need to be aware of what bullying is, be knowledgeable about the negative consequences of bullying for the victim, feel capable of handling bullying situations, and know which strategies to use in such situations (Kokko & Pörhölä, 2009; Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2016) In addition to this, teachers need to be aware of the group process of bullying. Students may not only be involved in a bullying situation as a victim or bully, but can also be involved indirectly, for example, as an assistant of the bully, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim, or outsider (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996).

Studies in several countries have demonstrated that teachers who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes, are more likely to intervene (Begotti, Tirassa, & Maran, 2018; Frisén, Hasselblad, & Holmqvist, 2012; Williford & Depaolis, 2016; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Also, teachers who actively stand against bullying have been associated with lower levels of

bullying in the classroom (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). However, previous research also indicates that teachers are not always well prepared for this task. For instance, teachers are not always aware of bullying in the classroom (Demaray, Malecki, Secord, & Lyell, 2013; Marshall, 2012; Oldenburg et al., 2016; Wachs, Bilz, Niproschke, & Schubarth, 2019), or do not always take bullying reports seriously (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Furthermore, teachers lack the confidence to intervene in bullying situations (Bauman & Hurley, 2008; Benítez, García-Berbén, & Fernández-Cabezas, 2009; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013). Teachers who do not perceive bullying as a serious issue, or who believe they do not have adequate skills, are less likely to intervene in bullying situations (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Ignoring bullying can enhance feelings of loneliness and isolation on the part of the victim. Also, by not intervening, teachers implicitly condone the bullying, which may, in turn, discourage victimized students from reporting bullying (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994), and discourage students who witness the bullying to intervene (Burger, Strohmeier, Spröber, Bauman, & Rigby, 2015). In addition, teachers do not seem to know which strategies they should use (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Marshall, 2012). Although minimal research on teacher responses in bullying situations have been conducted, some teachers choose strategies that are not likely to be effective, such as advising victims to avoid the bully or advising the victim to handle the bullying on their own (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

Most school-based anti-bullying intervention programs include some core components to support teachers, such as staff training to address and prevent bullying incidents; systematic assessment of bullying behavior; and anti-bullying student lessons or lessons to promote students' social-emotional competencies (Ansary et al., 2015; Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019; Marshall, 2012). Teacher and staff training aim to increase teachers' awareness of bullying by providing information on what constitutes bullying or a model to recognize bullying. These training sessions also aim to increase teachers' responsiveness to bullying by offering them a model on how to respond to acute bullying cases. Systematic assessment of bullying supports teachers in identifying bullying incidents and in monitoring the effectiveness of the anti-bullying efforts being implemented (Ansary et al., 2015). Student lessons may support teachers because of the "learning by teaching" mechanism. By teaching students about the mechanisms of bullying and by teaching them skills to intervene when it occurs, teachers are expected to be strengthened in their ability to deal with bullying as well. A study by Athola, Haataja, Kärnä, Poskiparta, and Salmivalli (2012) showed that teachers felt more able to deal with bullying behavior after participation in anti-bullying activities in which

teaching students about bullying played a major role. Although these components of anti-bullying programs can support teachers in their efforts to reduce and prevent bullying, little is known about teachers' own experiences with identifying and addressing bullying behavior in their classes. More specifically, little is known about what teachers find difficult bullying situations and how they deal with these situations in their classrooms. To provide teachers with better support, we need to know what obstacles teachers encounter in this area. Moreover, several studies have shown that novice teachers do not feel well prepared to reduce bullying effectively (Begotti et al., 2018; Lester, Waters, Pearce, Spears, & Falconer, 2018; Macaulay, Betts, Stiller, & Kellezi, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the particular challenges faced by less experienced teachers in order to provide them the additional training and support they need to combat bullying effectively.

In summary, previous research shows that teachers do not have sufficient tools to reduce bullying effectively and beginning teachers, in particular, need extra support. In addition, it is not well understood whether existing programs are well adapted to the needs of teachers. In the present study, we, therefore, aimed to investigate which bullying situations teachers consider "difficult" and how they deal with these situations. Furthermore, we examined whether background variables such as experience and previous anti-bullying efforts are connected with teachers' experiences related to difficult bullying situations. The results aim to provide an innovative insight into key characteristics of difficult bullying situations from the teacher's perspective. Insights gained from this explorative study can subsequently serve as input for the development or adjustment of anti-bullying programs that better meet the needs of teachers. In our study, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1)**: What do teachers consider difficult bullying situations?
> **Research Question 2 (RQ2)**: What strategies do teachers use to deal with these difficult bullying situations?
> **Research Question 3 (RQ3)**: What barriers do teachers encounter when they use these strategies when addressing difficult bullying situations?

Method

Participants

For this study, we used interview data obtained from 38 Dutch elementary school teachers ($\overline{X}$ teaching experience = 12.1 years, *SD* = 9.69) from 36 classrooms in 21 schools. The sample comprised 25 teachers recruited in the

urban area of Amsterdam and 13 teachers recruited in smaller cities and rural regions across the Netherlands. The urbanization level of schools varied widely; teachers in urban schools reported more sociocultural and income-related diversity in their student population compared with teachers in smaller cities and rural areas.

Most teachers were female (72.5%) and had more than 10 years of teaching experience ($n = 25$, 57.5%), reflecting the population of primary school teachers in the Netherlands (Traag, 2018). Participating teachers were active in each grade of elementary school: kindergarten (5%), Grade 3 (5%), Grade 4 (7.5%), Grade 5 (15%), and Grade 6 (30%), Grades 1 to 3 (27.5%), and Grades 4 to 6 (10%).

Procedure

An open sampling procedure was used to recruit teachers for this study. Teachers received an information letter about the goals and content of the study and were made aware of the possibility of withdrawing themselves from the study at any given time. Active consent was obtained from each participant. Interviews were conducted individually between May and July 2016 by members of a research group, including the principal researcher and five research assistants. The assistants were social science bachelor and master students who received a 2-hr training session by the principal researcher covering interview techniques (e.g., asking open questions, having a neutral attitude and being aware of the extent to which questions may evoke socially acceptable answers by teachers) and the introduction to an interview guide for the structured interviews (Seidman, 2019). Research assistants were also trained to ask clarifying questions, if necessary, to explore teachers' experienced difficulties in greater depth. The interviews lasted 60 minutes on average. Schools received a fee or a gift voucher for participating in the study. Recorded interviews were anonymized and transcribed for analysis.

Design

As we aimed to gain familiarity with a relatively new phenomenon in this field of research, we adopted a phenomenology approach as a research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design aimed at exploring individuals' experiences of a concept of which there is little knowledge (Creswell, 2014; Haradhan, 2018). This approach enabled us to make a first exploration and description of the daily experiences, difficulties, and needs of teachers regarding specific difficult bullying situations. As we investigated a subjective phenomenon, we based our descriptions on how teachers define

the concept of a difficult bullying situation. This information is also important to understand teachers' responses to bullying. For example, teachers with normative beliefs about bullying are less inclined to intervene in bullying situations (Hektner & Swenson, 2012).

A semi-structured interview guideline was developed, consisting of four topics. After some opening questions to start a comfortable conversation (i.e., the role of the teacher in the school and their teaching experience), we asked four main open-ending questions. The first question was how teachers defined bullying. The second question concerned whether teachers had experienced a difficult bullying situation in the last 3 months, and why they considered this to be a difficult situation. In the third question, we asked teachers to describe how they responded to this situation. The fourth question referred to whether they experienced any barriers during their response. Finally, some inventory questions were asked about what anti-bullying measures teachers have used in the previous years.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data to identify what teachers experienced as difficult bullying situations and how they responded to these situations. Thematic analysis is a data-driven type of analysis that allowed us to explore reoccurring themes, patterns, and concepts (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). To identify themes related to how teachers define bullying and what difficult bullying situations teachers experienced, the principal researcher coded sections of text. The research team, consisting of the principal researcher and three senior researchers, systematically compared sections of text and marked similarities and differences between sections and then refined the codes. This process resulted in 74 codes for how teachers defined bullying. Most of the codes (65) could be related to the widely used bullying definition of Olweus (1993) and have been categorized in the following themes: (a) intention, (b) duration, and (c) an imbalance of power. The remaining codes (nine) were categorized into the category "Other." For RQ1, we initially identified 28 themes, including themes as: "students' reluctance to report bullying" to "parents who disagree with anti-bullying interventions of the teacher." Several themes overlapped, resulting in a more compact categorization of 15 themes. For example, some themes were related to bullying happening out of the teachers' sight (i.e., in the hall, playground, or cyberbullying) and were grouped into one theme "Bullying out of the teachers' sight."

Next, we combined these categories into four overarching themes and compared categories to find relations between teachers' experiences and background variables, such as teaching experience or anti-bullying activities

in the school[1]. This process included constant comparisons between individual codes and across transcripts during the analysis. To investigate whether there is a relationship between some background variables and the difficult situations experienced by teachers, we compared teachers in different categories. Regarding the background variable "teaching experience," teachers were divided into five categories: 0 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, 16 to 20 years, and >20 years. Concerning the background variable "anti-bullying methods," teachers were asked whether they used one or more of the following methods: (a) a screening questionnaire, (b) teacher or staff training, (c) lessons for students, or (d) none of these methods. Next, we explored whether the percentages of teachers in the categories "teaching experience" and "anti-bullying methods" varied among teachers for each difficult situation experienced.

We used the whole-school approach as a heuristic framework (Ansary et al., 2015; Espelage & Swearer, 2003) to help us categorize the strategies that teachers mentioned to deal with difficult bullying situations. We categorized teachers' responses into four overarching categories: (a) responses involving individual students, (b) responses involving a larger peer group, (c) responses involving actors or places throughout the school, and (d) responses involving the parents. Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software program MAXQDA (version 18.1.0; VERBI Software GmbH, 2018).

Results

When asked how they defined bullying, the majority of the teachers (71%) reported that bullying is characterized by systematic negative behavior toward a specific student. Examples given by teachers are "repeated," "over a long period," or involves "continued negative behavior." Second, teachers see a distinction between "teasing" and "bullying" (45%) and identify bullying as a situation in which the victim experiences the behavior as negative or harmful. Third, teachers defined bullying when there is an intent on the part of the bully to hurt someone (21%). Fourth, a small proportion of the teachers mentioned that bullying is not something that happens solely between a bully and a victim, but that multiple students are involved in such a situation (5%), or that bullying is about physical aggression (5%). The majority of the teachers (71%) mentioned two or three of the above characteristics.

Of all 38 teachers, 21% had 0 to 5 years of teaching experience, 21% 6 to 10 years, 24% 11 to 15 years, 3% 16 to 20 years, and 29% had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Information about the number of years of teaching experience was missing for one teacher. The majority of the teachers (92%) indicated that they used several methods in the school to prevent and

reduce bullying behavior. Teachers reported using self-report questionnaires to identify bullying and victimization (40%), a bullying prevention training for teachers (24%), and student lessons about bullying (29%). None of the participating teachers used a structured anti-bullying program, such as a whole-school program, to prevent and reduce bullying.

What Do Teachers Consider Difficult Bullying Situations?

Our RQ1 focused on what teachers find difficult bullying situations. Thirty-two teachers reported a bullying situation that they considered to be difficult. From this, four themes emerged: (a) identifying bullying behavior that happens out of sight, (b) estimating the seriousness of a bullying incident, (c) addressing persistent bullying behavior, and (d) finding solutions with parents to reduce bullying behavior (see Table 1).

Six teachers reported that they did not experience any difficult bullying situations. There was no relation between teachers who did not experience any difficult bullying situations and their teaching experience or anti-bullying methods in place when compared with teachers who did experience difficulties. Below, we will only discuss those teachers who have experienced difficulties in dealing with bullying situations and do this separately for each theme.

Identifying bullying behavior. Teachers reported difficulties in identifying bullying behavior. In some cases, this was caused by students' reluctance to report bullying. In most cases, however, teachers experienced difficulties because bullying occurred at out-of-sight locations, such as in the hallway, during physical education, or after-school care. A separate category of bullying that happens out of sight is bullying in digital app groups. Teachers only became aware of this type of bullying when the incident had already escalated:

> This [incident] escalated in the WhatsApp group on Monday evening. [Students were] blocked and such. So they entered the classroom on Tuesday morning in a very bad mood. They were all angry, and a big physical fight occurred. I had to solve this, and that was difficult. I started a classroom discussion, and it turned out that at least ten children were aware of the conflict and that this had already been going on for weeks. (R10, Grade 4)

As for students' reluctance to report bullying, teachers think this is because they are afraid of reprisals from the perpetrator. This reluctancy applies not only to students who are being bullied but also to classmates who witness the bullying:

Table 1. Teachers' Experiences With Difficult Bullying Situations (*N* = 32).

Themes (number of teachers)	Subthemes (number of quotes)
Identifying bullying (14)	Bullying in WhatsApp groups of which the teacher is not a member to monitor students (7)
	Bullying out of the teacher's sight: in the hall, at PE, and during after-school-care (6)
	Students are reluctant to report bullying behavior to the teacher (4)
Estimating seriousness of bullying (11)	Students over-report victimization (5)
	Conflicting stories of involved students (5)
	Determining whether a situation can be defined as bullying behavior (4)
	Denial of suspected perpetrators when confronted with the incident (3)
Addressing persistent bullying (21)	Bullying behavior by short-tempered students (14)
	Improving the situation of victimized students (9)
Finding solutions with parents (13)	Parents and teachers disagree on preferred intervention (8)
	Parents' denial of their child's involvement as a perpetrator (4)

Note. PE = physical education.
Teachers reported on several themes and sub-themes: numbers, therefore, do not add up to the total number of *N* = 32.

> They [the classmates] did not dare to report the incident either. There is a chance that you will be scolded via the group's digital app because we had not made any agreements about it yet. So that was not safe for students, and that was probably the problem. (R17, Grade 6)

Of the eight teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience, half (*n* = 4) have indicated difficulties in identifying bullying. Of the 21 teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience, less than one third experienced these difficulties. These data suggest that novice teachers experience difficulties in detecting bullying more often than experienced teachers. Furthermore, we found no link between anti-bullying methods used by teachers and the difficulties experienced in identifying bullying behavior: of the 15 teachers who used a screening questionnaire, almost half (47%) had difficulties in this area. Of the nine teachers who participated in a teacher or staff training, 44% reported difficulties, and of the 12 teachers who implemented student lessons, more than one third (33%) reported difficulties in identifying bullying.

Estimating the seriousness of a bullying incident. Teachers reported four factors that complicated estimating the seriousness of bullying incidents: students' over-reporting victimization, receiving conflicting explanations, perpetrators' denial of bullying, and difficulties in determining whether a situation can be defined as bullying. Particularly in situations where teachers had not witnessed the bullying incident themselves, they struggled to determine whether students were not over-reporting bullying, possibly as a result of misperceiving teasing behavior or a single conflict as bullying: "He saw everything as bullying behavior" (R6, Grade 6), or "She experiences that she is being bullied very quickly. She will come and tell me: they bully me, and I cannot play with them" (R37, Grade 5). Teachers indicated that students who over-reported victimization were often the ones that are easily offended, or that bully themselves, for example:

> It is like: "Is this bullying or 'just' fighting on the football field?" He [the victim] says, "I am being bullied all the time; they always pick on me." And I wonder: "Is that the case? Or is it just in the moment that he says something like that?" He often feels victimized, but whether that is going on is always subjective. I think: he is a perpetrator just as well, or how do you say it . . . Interviewer: bully? Teacher: I would not say bully, but rather a child who has difficulties in controlling his emotions and quickly beats or kicks other children as well. (R32, Grade 1/2)

Teachers furthermore identified the conflicting stories that they receive from different students as a complicating factor in estimating the seriousness of the bullying incident. Students blaming each other for starting the incident, for example, makes it difficult for teachers to determine what has happened. Teachers also suspected that alleged bullies give socially desirable answers or deny their role in the incident when being asked details of the bullying incident.

Finally, teachers did not always know when a situation can be defined as bullying behavior, or what behavior they should pay attention to when estimating the seriousness of an incident. For example:

> Boys in my classroom are talking about pranking all the time. Pranking, it seems to be another thing on social media, dissing each other. Where do you draw the line? When is it still funny, and when do you call it bullying? (R17, Grade 6).

Half of the teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience (four out of eight) experienced difficulties in estimating the seriousness of a bullying situation, while a quarter of teachers with >10 years of teaching experience (6

Half of the teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience (four out of eight) and two thirds of teachers with >10 years of teaching experience (14 out of 21) reported experiencing difficulties with addressing persistent bullying. There seems to be no difference in this area between teachers with little or much teaching experience. There was no clear difference either between the type of anti-bullying methods used by teachers and their experienced difficulties in addressing persistent bullying behavior. The majority of teachers who used a screening questionnaire (60%) or carried out student lessons (58%) experienced difficulties in this area. Almost half of the teachers (44%) who participated in training also reported difficulties.

Finding solutions with parents. Teachers experienced difficulties in agreeing on solutions to reduce existing cases of bullying with parents, mentioning parents' disagreement with teacher interventions, and parents' denial of their child's role in bullying situations as complicating factors. Some teachers disagreed with parents when discussing an intervention with parents:

> We told these parents: "Maybe [name boy] is better off in another group; he might have more friends in that group." But parents did not like that. So . . . I think that this boy might need extra guidance, but the problem is that the parents do not give permission to do that. (R24, Grade 1/2/3)

This disagreement was the result of discrepancies between the teacher's view on bullying and that of the parents. For example, one teacher addressed recurrent swearing of a student toward a classmate with his parents to reduce such behavior, but these parents were not convinced that swearing is a bad thing (R37, Grade 5).

In some cases, parents made it clear to teachers that they expected a specific intervention strategy from them:

> The parents wanted us to punish these children [perpetrators of their child] openly and demanded that we would cooperate (otherwise the parents would report it to the authorities). (R34, Grade 4)

Teachers indicated that these parents were often angry with them or at the school, as a result of which no mutual agreement on teacher interventions could be reached. Teachers further indicated that parents did not believe the teacher when they told them their child was bullying other children:

> I cannot get it into the mother's head that it is her son who is almost always the one who starts [the incident]. (R21, Grade 4)

or:

The parents of [name boy] do not recognize their child in this story and do not want to act on it. That is very difficult. (R25, Grade 1/2/3)

The difficulty for teachers was that parents do not take them seriously when they raise this issue and that parents themselves are sometimes part of the problem, and teachers find this difficult to discuss with parents, even when they do this together with a behavioral specialist in the school. For example: "An unsafe home environment, or psychological problems in the child . . . When you report these kinds of issues to the parents, they immediately go into a defensive mode" (R15, Grade 2–6).

Five out of eight teachers with little teaching experience (0–5 years) indicated having difficulties finding solutions with parents. Seven out of 21 teachers with relatively much teaching experience (>10 years) indicated to experience these difficulties. These results seem to indicate that less experienced teachers have somewhat more difficulty with this. Furthermore, our results indicate no clear pattern between the type of anti-bullying method and the extent to which teachers experienced difficulties in finding solutions with parents. While 40% of all teachers who used a screening questionnaire and 44% of all teachers who participated in teacher or staff training reported difficulties, this was 33% for all teachers who taught student lessons.

What Strategies Do Teachers Use and Which Barriers Do They Encounter?

RQ2 and RQ3 of our study involved how teachers deal with the difficult bullying situations that they experienced and the barriers they encounter. From this data, four levels of action surfaced at which strategies are used: strategies involving (a) individual students who are directly involved in the bullying situation, (b) all students in the classroom, (c) colleagues, or measures throughout the school, and (d) parents. In total, 28 teachers reported strategies to deal with difficult bullying situations. Table 2 shows the level of action and the specific strategy employed for each type of bullying situation identified.

Identifying bullying behavior. Instead of systematically monitoring bullying to identify such behavior, the majority of the teachers used strategies to prevent incidents that were difficult to identify, such as bullying in the group's digital group app or outside the classroom, and reluctance in reporting bullying. Most teachers used strategies focused on all students in the classroom, such as discussing the incident, discussing students' reluctance to report bullying,

Table 2. Teachers' Strategies to Deal With Difficult Bullying Situations on Four Intervention Levels ($N = 28$).

Themes (number of teachers)	Intervention level (number of quotes)			
	Individual students	Class	School	Parents
Identifying bullying (12)	Supporting victims (6) Monitoring victims (2) Talking to bully (1) Transferring victim (1)	Discussing incident (7) Making agreements (3) Promoting social behavior (2)	Involving behavioral specialist (2) Consulting with playground supervisors (1) Referring to school principal (1)	Talking about incident (6) Making agreements (2)
Estimating seriousness of bullying (6)	Verifying incident (5) Monitoring students (2) Supporting victims (2) Blaming victims (2) Disciplining bully (1)	Discussing incident (1)		
Addressing persistent bullying (16)	Confronting bullies (11) Finding solutions with bullies (3) Linking buddy to victims (2) Providing social skill training for victims (2) Supporting victims (3) Monitoring victims (1)	Teaching anti-bullying lessons (3) Discussing incident (3) Making agreements (1) Making students co-responsible for classroom climate (1)	Consulting colleagues (1) Improving playground supervision (1) Discussing incident in special care team (1)	Talking about incident (3) Making agreements (1) Informing parents (1)
Finding solutions with parents (3)	Explaining relevance (1)		Developing anti-bullying policies (1)	Continuing dialogue (1) Communicating school-wide anti-bullying policy (1)

Note. Teachers reported on several themes and intervention levels: numbers, therefore, do not add up to the total number of $N = 28$.

making agreements on possible student actions in these situations, and promoting pro-social behaviors. For example, teachers discussed the use of the digital app group by asking students questions like "For which purposes do we want to use the digital group app?" (R17, Grade 6). Teachers also made agreements with students on how to use this app group by letting them think about solutions and agreements and by guiding students toward clear and concise agreements. Another classroom strategy involved promoting pro-social behavior among students, for example, by giving students rewards for social interactions with their classmates.

Teachers also used strategies at the level of individual students by monitoring former victimized students, supporting these students, and transferring a student to another group. For example, one teacher created a support group of peers around the victim to prevent future bullying. Other strategies were related to incidents that had escalated. In these situations, teachers involved other adults, such as parents (e.g., talking with parents about the incident and solutions), and colleagues (e.g., behavioral specialist, playground supervisors, and the school principal).

Barriers encountered by teachers were related to an experienced lack of skills to prevent out-of-sight bullying situations adequately:

> I am at a loss as to what to do, you know . . . This social media bullying happens at home, and they bring it into school. (R12, Grade 6)

and:

> This is why it [the bullying] is so intangible. (R2, Grade 6)

They also expressed uncertainty in deciding on an appropriate and effective course of action, for example:

> How do you create a safe environment so that students open up? I just did not succeed. (R12, Grade 6)

Estimating the seriousness of a bullying incident. The majority of the teachers attempted to verify what had happened by talking with individual students. Where teachers suspected students of over-reporting peer victimization, they tried to convince the victim to adjust their behavior (e.g., "What can you change in <u>your</u> behavior?" R32, Grade 1/2). This concerned cases where students were thought to provoke the bullying, for example, by showing dominant behaviors toward other students. Teachers reported feeling unsure of this approach, because in one case, the bullying returned, and in another case, the

student who was being bullied left the school. Some teachers indicated that they took self-reported victimization seriously at any time because this experience could be harmful to these students when ignored by the teacher. These teachers increased their observations of these students, listened to, and supported these students. For example, one teacher would ask these students to think about solutions and also monitored whether students acted on it.

In cases where students reported conflicting stories about the bullying situation, teachers responded by firmly disapproving of the bullying behavior in general, regardless of which student was responsible for instigating it:

> I am sorry, but it is no excuse to say, "What he did is much worse," what you did is incredibly stupid too . . . I just try to make it clear to these students that I really do not like negative behavior by getting really angry. At the same time, I emphasize that it is the behavior I disapprove of, not the child himself. (R26, Grade 4/5/6)

Other teachers responded to conflicting stories by applying measures that they believed would most likely be appropriate to the situation, such as disciplining the supposed bully. Barriers that teachers experienced were related to doubts about whether they had given disproportionate consequences to the bully or have done too little to stop the bullying.

Addressing persistent bullying behavior.   Regarding addressing persistent bullying behavior, the majority of the teachers used strategies at the level of individual students who were involved in the actual bullying situation. Where bullying behavior initiated by short-tempered students was concerned, teachers mainly confronted these students with the impact of their negative behavior on other students. Here, teachers indicated that they mainly suppress such unwanted behavior without addressing the underlying problem, because this type of student tends to provoke peers at every moment that teacher supervision is absent. Some teachers reported that strategies aimed at suppressing negative behavior were not sufficient to reduce the behavior. For instance, a teacher reported that a student was insensitive to the disciplinary measures taken:

> I do not think this can be solved in school. You can do your best to put him in that [a safe] group; I have to say, he is doing a bit better. I also think this because peers get to know him a little better. But yeah, I just got another complaint, I mean, he was teasing because he keeps making animal sounds towards a girl, and she comes to me to complain, and you can see him laughing broadly. I think it takes more than having conversations about negative behavior in the classroom, which is sufficient for most students. (R31, Grade 3/4)

Regarding improving the situation of victimized students who are being bullied for a prolonged period, teachers tried to find solutions together with the bully and the victim. Also, teachers reported having good experiences with giving support to victims by linking them to a buddy. Other strategies involved monitoring the situation together with parents and making clear agreements with them.

Teachers also used classical strategies to address persistent bullying by discussing the incident with all students and providing student lessons about bullying, a psychophysical training to gain confidence, and lessons to improve the social environment in the classroom.

Finding solutions with parents. Only a few teachers mentioned strategies to address the issue of finding solutions with parents, and these occurred mainly at the level of the school and during individual conversations with parents. Regarding parents' disagreement with the type of intervention proposed, one teacher indicated that it helped to present parents with a clear intervention plan for their child and to communicate clearly with parents what expectations they had of them.

Teachers also experienced barriers in applying strategies to find solutions with parents. In two cases, teachers felt embarrassed when they had to point out that parents were part of the problem and consequently avoided a conversation with parents about this topic. Instead, these teachers focused on improving school interventions to reduce bullying. Other barriers were related to coping with parents who responded defensively or angrily when discussing planned interventions, or how to cope with feelings of failure when parents decided to handle the situation differently. One teacher, for example, indicated that parents decided to transfer their child to another school, which made her doubt whether she had handled the situation appropriately.

Discussion

In the present study, we aimed to investigate which bullying situations teachers find difficult to handle, what strategies they use to deal with these situations, and what barriers they encounter in doing so. We found that the vast majority of the teachers in this study indeed experienced recurrent difficult bullying situations. We were able to classify these difficulties in four categories as follows: (a) identifying bullying behavior, (b) estimating its seriousness, (c) addressing persistent bullying behavior, and (d) solving bullying together with parents.

Teachers responded to difficult bullying situations in distinct ways. Regarding the first category, that is, the difficulty in identifying bullying, we found that very few teachers used strategies or instruments to screen

for bullying behavior. Instead, they used strategies at the classroom level, discussing bullying generally to prevent future bullying. For the second category, that is, estimating the seriousness while not getting clear information from students, we uncovered that teachers intervened based on the information they received, even if they were not sure of the situation. Regarding the third category of difficult situations, that is, addressing persistent bullying behavior, we found that teachers kept trying to suppress the negative behaviors of the perpetrators. Finally, concerning the fourth category, that is, solving the bullying problems with parents who showed resistance toward how the teacher handled bullying, most teachers lacked strategies that helped them respond to this situation.

The findings of our study also indicate that teachers experienced specific barriers in each of these four domains. A substantial proportion of the teachers reported feelings that are related to a low level of self-efficacy, that is, uncertainty as to whether they dealt with these situations appropriately. Concerning the first, identifying bullying and estimating its seriousness, the difficulty for teachers was that the bullying happens out of their sight and that students involved tend to report conflicting information. For the situations regarding persistent bullying behavior, teachers experienced a lack of skills and time to deal with children involved in continual bullying situations or to deal with multiple problems. Regarding situations dealing with parents, an important barrier for teachers was that they did not know how to solve the situation when parents disagreed with the teacher's solution.

While previous research has indicated that teachers doubt their efficacy for handling bullying (Begotti et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2018; Macaulay et al., 2019), the current study provides a more in-depth look at the challenges teachers face that contribute to their feelings of low self-efficacy. Our findings indicate that teachers have difficulty identifying and estimating the seriousness of bullying situations, are in line with previous studies that showed teachers to feel inadequately prepared to handle a variety of bullying situations (Marshall, 2012; Oldenburg et al., 2016). For instance, several studies found a discrepancy between bullying reported by students and bullying reported by teachers and concluded that teachers are not always able to identify bullying cases (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Demaray et al., 2013; Rupp, Elliott, & Gresham, 2018). Our findings add to this observation by showing that teachers especially experience difficulties identifying and estimating bullying when incidents happen out of their sight.

Previous studies have shown that teachers find it difficult to support the unique needs of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (State, Simonsen, Hirn, & Wills, 2019; Stefan, Rebega, & Cosma, 2015; Taylor & Smith, 2019). Our findings highlight that this is also the case in bullying

situations. Teachers in our study experienced a lack of skills that would help them provide a structural solution for students who bully and who additionally have other emotional and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, our study showed that teachers experienced difficulties in finding agreement with parents on handling bullying situations. Previous research has shown that parents sometimes have different views on what bullying constitutes (Stives, May, Pilkinton, Bethel, & Eakin, 2019). Our findings substantiate this and indicate that finding a solution for a bullying situation together with the parents is certainly not self-evident.

A noteworthy observation in this study is that, when asked to define bullying, none of the teachers explicitly mentioned the imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, despite this characteristic being part of Olweus' (1993) widely adopted definition of bullying. Moreover, only two teachers mentioned the group process, in which students who witness the incident influence the bullying process, meaning that even teachers who had access to preventive anti-bullying training did not mention this process. Teachers also reported difficulties in determining whether an incident should be considered a bullying situation, indicating a lack of knowledge of what bullying constitutes. This finding is in line with Oldenburg et al. (2016), who showed that teachers who had participated in the KiVa anti-bullying program did not always have a clear understanding of what bullying is.

Another notable finding was that some teachers normalized bullying by stating that they understood why some children were being bullied. As a result, they advised these students to adjust their behavior. This attitude and intervention strategy is undesirable, as it can lead to emotional distress and harm the victim's mental health (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Troop-Gordon, 2015). It also needs to be recognized that self-reported victims who do not report all the characteristics of being bullied (i.e., repetition, power imbalance) also have psychosocial problems compared with non-victimized youth (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014), and should, therefore, be treated as a serious case by teachers. It is striking that despite anti-bullying methods and national law to reduce bullying, there are still teachers who do not seem to take bullying seriously. Our findings suggest that there is a need for more awareness among teachers about the prevalence of bullying and the negative consequences for victimized students.

We also looked into the relationship between used anti-bullying methods and teachers' experienced difficulties. Our findings showed that teachers who have little teaching experience seem to experience more difficulties than colleagues with more than 10 years of teaching experience. This finding is in line with findings of previous studies that novice teachers feel not well prepared to reduce school bullying (Begotti et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2018;

Macaulay et al., 2019), and shows the specific circumstances in which these teachers experience these difficulties, such as identifying bullying incidents, estimating the seriousness of an incident, and in finding solutions together with parents. Also, our study showed that, overall, there was no link between the anti-bullying methods teachers used and the extent to which they experienced difficulties. A possible explanation for this finding is that the teachers in our study did not receive sufficient support from these specific methods. However, due to the small number of teachers, these results should cautiously be interpreted. Future research could investigate this more extensively. Follow-up research could also focus on whether specific anti-bullying components or programs are beneficial for teachers and reduce their perceived difficulties.

Strengths and Limitations

Our findings provide insight into teachers' real-life experiences. Little was known about the situations that teachers deal with in regard to bullying. These insights are, therefore, a particular strength of the study. Such information is important because it helps us identify those areas where teachers need to be strengthened in their anti-bullying strategies. Another strength of our study is that we interviewed a substantial number of teachers, which enabled us to collect data concerning a wide variety of bullying situations.

A possible limitation of this study is that teachers' answers may be biased as a result of self-reported behavior. People generally tend to present themselves favorably, and this may have resulted in a self-presentation bias (Kopcha & Sullivan, 2007). Although the teachers in our study did report the difficulties they experienced, this outcome may still be an underestimation of the difficult situations they experience with bullying. Future research could investigate to what extent the experiences of the teachers in our sample can be generalized to a broader population of teachers.

Furthermore, our findings on the relation between anti-bullying methods and experienced difficult bullying situations are based on general reports concerning the anti-bullying methods that were available for teachers at the time of the interviews. As we did not collect data on the extent to which teachers have implemented these methods, we were not able to relate the level of implementation to the extent to which teachers experienced difficult bullying situations.

Finally, due to the qualitative nature of this study and the selective sample of teachers, our findings cannot be generalized to the whole population of teachers. Teachers were able to sign up for the interviews. This procedure may have resulted in a biased sample in which only teachers who like to talk

about bullying were included. This selective sample may have influenced our conclusions about how teachers perceived bullying situations and what teachers do to deal with these situations.

Practical Implications

Our findings show that teachers experienced difficulties in identifying bullying cases, indicating that they need access to good and manageable screening tools to detect bullying. Peers are usually present in cases of bullying (Hawkins & Pepler, 2001) and should be viewed as valuable sources of information in assessing bullying behavior. Multi-informant methods in which self-reports and peer-reports are combined and social network analysis in which teachers gain insight into students' relations could, therefore, be useful for teachers (Huitsing & Monks, 2018; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001).

Another way to support teachers in identifying bullying is to strengthen their skills in identifying and estimating bullying through training. Teacher training should focus on providing knowledge on what bullying constitutes and skills on how to talk with students to find out about bullying incidents in a constructive way. Yoon and Bauman (2014) have shown that that teacher training that includes a component about understanding the seriousness and consequences of bullying helps teachers address bullying behavior in schools.

Our finding that teachers experienced a lack of skills and time to address persistent bullying also stresses the importance of teacher training and preservice teacher training. Such training should focus on teachers learning the strategies to support students with multiple problems. Another strategy is to provide teachers with additional structural support from the school, for example, from behavioral specialists or school nurses, who are more adequately equipped to deal with problematic student behavior (Fisher, Cassidy, & Mitchell, 2017).

Finally, teachers can be supported in working with parents to prevent and reduce bullying. Teachers can benefit from conversation techniques as part of a teacher training course or from structured protocols that guide them in difficult conversations with parents. Another strategy would be to enhance the school support system in this regard, by providing a clear school-wide response to bullying among teachers and administrators and communicating this message to all parents.

Furthermore, it is vital to invest in the preservice training of teachers so that they are well prepared to address bullying right from the start of their careers. Courses on identifying and addressing bullying through evidence-based programs and teacher training should be incorporated into the regular curriculum of preservice teacher education.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies can focus on the development and effectiveness of teacher components of anti-bullying programs (i.e., screening tool, training, guidelines) to strengthen teachers' abilities to address bullying. Further research could evaluate how teacher training increases teachers' levels of self-efficacy to intervene in difficult bullying situations, such as addressing bullying behavior with students who show social-emotional problems.

It is also valuable to carry out qualitative research into the good practices of teachers dealing with bullying behavior. As there is still little knowledge on what practices are effective, follow-up research could focus on difficult bullying situations and which strategies students and teachers consider being effective in reducing bullying.

Conclusion

This study has provided insight into the specific difficulties teachers experience in identifying and reducing bullying behavior. As bullying usually happens out of sight from teachers, they are often not aware of the bullying behavior until it escalates, or a student or parent comes to school to report it. In addition, teachers often experience a lack of knowledge about the nature of bullying and lack the skills and time to deal adequately with children involved in persistent bullying. Teachers also experience difficulties in dealing with parents who do not agree with their solutions to bullying at school.

A strategy that follows from our results is providing teachers with a systematic screening tool do detect bullying behavior at an early stage (e.g., at the beginning of the academic year). Such a tool should provide teachers with detailed protocols to deal with students (at risk of being) involved in bullying situations. Our results also indicate that teachers may benefit from both pre-service and in-service training to tackle bullying in their classrooms. Such training should address the characteristics of bullying, the group process that is involved, and it should give them tools to deal with bullying, such as protocols for specific bullying contexts (i.e., dealing with multi-problem behavior or parents with a different view on bullying behavior and solutions). Novice teachers, in particular, seem to need professional support through training and the use of an anti-bullying method.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. The code tree can be requested from the first author.

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