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## **The Nature, Extent and Impact of Educator Targeted Bullying on School Teachers in West Malaysia**

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## **The Nature, Extent and Impact of Educator Targeted Bullying on School Teachers in West Malaysia**

### **Abstract**

This study examines the nature, prevalence and impact of educator targeted bullying (ETB) in a sample of 575 Malaysian school teachers. Specifically it was predicted that ethnicity may be related to exposure to ETB; that frequency of exposure would vary by type of ETB; that there would be tenure-related differences in terms of exposure and burnout; and that teaching experience could moderate the exposure-burnout relationship.

Results suggest that less severe forms of ETB are more prevalent than physical forms; and that educators with increased teaching experience are less exposed to ETB. ETB exhibits a negative impact on burnout; and is strongest for student-related burnout. Increased experience buffers the ETB-student-related burnout relationship while ethnicity is unrelated to exposure to ETB.

**Keywords:** educator targeted bullying (ETB), bullying, burnout, schools, teachers, educators.

## **Introduction**

### *Educator Targeted Bullying (ETB)*

Over the past twenty years, a wealth of research on workplace bullying has consistently demonstrated considerable detrimental impact on employee health and well-being. While the prevalence, antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying by superiors and colleagues in school and educational settings have been reasonably well investigated; the nature and impact of educator targeted bullying (ETB) on health and well-being is substantially less understood.

Studies of ETB have predominantly examined the problem in terms of frequency, type and demographic-related prevalence (Chen & Astor, 2009; De Wet, 2010; Pervin & Turner, 1998) ; but no study has examined the potential consequences of ETB on educator burnout.

The contribution of the present study to the knowledge of ETB is threefold. First, it seeks to examine the nature and prevalence of ETB in a population where ETB has not been previously studied – that of Malaysian educators. Second, it seeks to address much needed empirical research on the impact of ETB on educator health and well-being, specifically experience of burnout. Third, it seeks to examine the role of teaching experience and ethnicity to the exposure of ETB-burnout relationship.

A limited but growing number of studies have shown that ETB is a serious issue worldwide. In the United States (US) between the period of 1992 and 1996, the average annual rate of victimisation from ETB was 76 incidents per 1000 educators (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005). More recent research by Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2012) reported that approximately 84% of educators in the state of Virginia were subject to rude/disrespectful behaviour by students; while 43% experienced obscene remarks and gestures.

Early research conducted in the United Kingdom reported similar prevalence rates. A report on an inner London school conducted by Pervin and Turner (1998), indicated that up to 91% of educators had been exposed to ETB at some point in their teaching career; with over half reporting that they had been victims over the past year, and 21% indicating they had suffered from ETB early on in their teaching career.

A more recent study by De Wet and Jacobs (2006) in South Africa reported ETB prevalence rates in the region of 80%; while research conducted by Özkılıç (2012) in Turkey, reported overall ETB prevalence at 41%. However, a small number of studies conducted in East Asia reported significantly lower prevalence rates, although this may in part be due to differences in the methodological approaches taken in such studies. A study in Taiwan by Chen and Astor (2009) which examined students' reports of bullying indicated that 30% of students surveyed admitted being involved in at least one aggressive act against their school teachers in the last year. However, a study using Middle and High School teachers in Korea, by Moon and McCluskey (2014) reported that approximately a third of educators had experienced some form of ETB in the last two years.

The limited number of studies suggests one potential problem is that many educational institutions perceive ETB as 'part of the job'; and therefore do not acknowledge it as a problem or provide sufficient support for victims. Although some two decades have passed since the publication of Pervin and Turner's (1998) report highlighting the failure of schools to acknowledge the existence of ETB; and the resulting loss of confidence experienced by educators; ETB continues to be largely ignored by both educators and management alike. If recognised, the extent and severity are grossly underestimated. Nevertheless, researchers and academics are in agreement that adequate teaching and learning simply cannot take place when

educators are bullied by their students (Chen & Astor, 2009; De Wet, 2010; Moon & McCluskey, 2014; Pervin & Turner, 1998).

### *Definition of ETB*

Bullying at work is traditionally defined by a tripartite criteria characterised by: “(1) aggressive behaviour which is directed towards another party that is intentional and meant to cause harm; (2) carried out repeatedly over time; and (3) an interpersonal relationship characterised by the imbalance of power” (Rigby, 2004, p 288). ETB differs from typical workplace bullying in that the party of lower status within the organisation (the student) inflicts the bullying behaviour on someone of higher status (the educator). This type of bullying has also been referred to as upward bullying, for example managers bullied by their employees.

For ETB, the criteria concerning the imbalance of the power relationship cannot be applied in the same manner. Instead, the power differential is overturned - the student achieves greater power over the educator (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). This reversal of power can occur in several ways. The student may have little respect for elders or figures of authority, or feel that the educator has not earned their respect, thereby deliberately violating codes of behaviour usually ascribed to figures of authority. Alternatively, the student may enjoy a socially superior status amongst his or her peers, and convince them to follow their example in bullying a particular educator. Although some may find it inconceivable that a child can bully an adult, reports of students attacking their educators (be it verbally, physically or emotionally) suggest otherwise.

For example, in the US between the period of 2003 to 2004, up to 7% of primary and secondary school teachers reported having been threatened with physical injury; with 3%

actually assaulted by students (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). For the purposes of the present study ETB refers to a range of aggressive behaviours involving the victimisation of educators by students (Moon & McCluskey, 2014). Acts of ETB may be verbal, non-verbal, physical, direct or indirect; along a continuum of severity (adapted from De Wet & Jacobs, 2006).

Misbehaviours and disruptive behaviours should not be misinterpreted as ETB, although there is little distinction between the two. Misbehaviours and disruptive behaviours are actions that aim to interfere and distract the flow of learning; including verbal abuse or physical aggression towards an educator, disturbing other students, or talking out of turn (Houghton, Wheldall, & Merrett, 1988).

Such behaviour however can develop into ETB if prolonged in duration and aimed at disempowering educators. Pervin and Turner (1998) further explain that when the aim of these behaviours changes from simply disrupting lessons to challenging the confidence of the educator, such behaviour develops into ETB.

### *Consequences of ETB*

Victims of workplace bullying exhibit a range of negative health consequences. These include increased loneliness, peer rejection, anxiety, depression and lowered self-esteem (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Studies have suggested that ETB may lead to increased distress among educators. In De Wet's (2010) qualitative study interviewees mentioned that the experience of being belittled and disempowered by students made them feel helpless. In Pervin and Turner's (1998) study, 15% of educators who experienced ETB exhibited both lowered career expectations and lowered expectations of student performance. Approximately 6% of educators also reported having left their workplace because of ETB; suggesting a possible link

between ETB and staff turnover. Studies by Astor et al. (2005) and De Wet and Jacobs (2010) report similar concerns by educators who perceive ETB as having a negative effect on the learning opportunities of other students and their overall quality of teaching. Others felt forced to leave the profession due to fear for their personal safety. .

In summary, although these studies have shown that ETB could have a detrimental impact on individual health and well-being to a certain extent, no study has examined this relationship in statistical terms. The present study therefore attempts to address this gap by assessing the extent to which exposure to ETB can affect educator burnout.

### *Burnout in the Teaching Profession*

Burnout is typically viewed as ‘a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding.’ (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501) A key feature of burnout is the attribution of fatigue and exhaustion to specific domains or spheres of a person’s life (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005). Burnout is said to be particularly prominent in occupations involving interactions with clients. It has important dysfunctional ramifications, implying substantial costs to both individuals and organisations. These include the deterioration of mental and physical health, social and family relationships, decreased job performance, absenteeism, and turnover (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Teaching has long been identified as a particularly stressful occupation (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986). Burnout in educators may be attributed to a range of different factors including excessive work, lack of support, low salaries, public criticism and student disciplinary problems (Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987). Educator burnout has been shown to affect



decreased quality of teaching; increased absenteeism (Cherniss, 1980) and turnover intentions (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986).

The present study utilizes the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) (Kristensen et al., 2005) to assess burnout. The CBI is a 19-item questionnaire measuring three sub-dimensions of burnout: personal, client (student), and work-related. Personal burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion experienced by a person, regardless of their participation in the workforce (i.e. a generic burnout scale). Client-related burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue experienced by people who work with clients. Work-related burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue related to work. The CBI was chosen over other burnout inventories as it is important to be able to identify the domain from which symptoms stemmed; and also because it is a psychometrically robust and freely available instrument, utilised on a variety of western as well as eastern populations (Bagaajav, Myagmarjav, Nanjid, Otgon, & Chae, [2011](#); Klein, Grosse Frie, Blum, & von dem Knesebeck, [2010](#); Lin & Lin, 2013; and [Tsai & Chan, 2011](#)). These include both educators (Milfont, Denny, Ameratunga, Robinson, & Merry, 2008) and Malaysian human resources personnel (Santos, Mustafa, & Chern, 2016).

#### *The role of teaching experience in ETB and burnout*

Age has consistently been shown to be negatively correlated with burnout (Ackerley, Burnell, Holder, & Kurdek, 1988). While age is closely linked with work experience and higher pay; researchers have advised that this relationship should be viewed with caution due to survival bias - i.e. those who burnout early in their careers tend to leave the profession (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Therefore survivors tend to exhibit lower levels of burnout. It

should be emphasised however that turnover among Malaysian educators remains generally low, as educators are effectively tenured civil servants.

Research has documented how experience in the field could both contribute to an increase in emotional competence and a significant decrease in stress (Humpel & Caputi, 2001). Studies by Lucas, Atwood and Hagaman (1993) for example, reported that more experienced nurses displayed decreased work stress; while Decker (1997), showed that increased experience was negatively related to burnout. In the teaching profession, Laub (1998) found younger educators to be at greater risk of burnout than their more senior colleagues.

The present study seeks to analyse this relationship further at two levels: first by exploring the possibility of tenure-related differences in burnout among less and more experienced educators; and second by examining the impact of teaching experience as a potential moderator in the ETB/burnout relationship.

The authors argue that experience in the field of teaching is a key attribute to combating ETB. Research suggests that more experienced employees display reduced negative psychological characteristics due to both increased rewards and desensitisation to stressors (Humpel & Caputi, 2001). It should therefore follow that these same employees will have had ample opportunity to develop effective strategies to cope with various stressors in the workplace.

A study by Indik, Seashore, and Slesinger (1964) suggests that the process of developing appropriate coping strategies for dealing with stressors in the workplace requires both time and mastery. As educators accumulate experience they become more adept at handling difficult student-teacher interactions, and are less likely to be duped by student tactics and pranks. For example, research by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) has shown that more experienced educators were found to have higher self-efficacy beliefs than novice educators in their

instruction strategies and classroom management. As educators become more attuned to students' needs; and develop an increased understanding of feelings and behaviour they are more likely to show empathy towards students. In turn, these students are more likely to treat their educators with respect and deference.

This increased mastery over student-teacher interactions therefore comes with experience and could act as a buffer between the relationship exposure to bullying and burnout.

### ***The present study***

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The stress-based model of exposure to work-related violence proposed by Cox and Leather (1994) provides a means of conceptualising and quantifying the effects of ETB on educators. In accordance with the model, exposure to direct and indirect forms of aggression in the workplace (ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault and ignoring damage to property), may constitute discernible sources of stress resulting in strain or harm, such as impaired well-being, sub-optimal health and increased withdrawal behaviour (Santos, Leather, Dunn, & Zarola, 2009; Schat & Kelloway, 2003; Steffgen, 2008).

Applied to the present study, exposure to different forms of ETB therefore act as psychosocial stressors for educators, which could result in strain or harm in the form of personal, work and student-related burnout. According to Cox and Leather (1994), this stressor-strain relationship could also be affected by intervening factors such as demographic, individual difference and social variables; whereby such variables act as a moderator or mediator between stressor and strain. In the present study, the role of tenure (specifically that of teaching

experience) is examined as a potential moderator between exposure to ETB and the burnout relationship.

### *Study Aims and Hypotheses*

The majority of studies on ETB have focussed on western educational institutions; with the exception of Chen and Astor's (2009) study in Taiwan, Moon and McCluskey's (2014) and Moon, Morash, Jang, and Jeong's (2014) studies in South Korea. The present study therefore contributes to much needed research on ETB in a non-western context. The present study aims to shed light on the prevalence and severity of ETB within Malaysian educational institutions by gathering evidence on both educators' awareness of ETB and the major types of ETB to which they are exposed.

Malaysia, located in Southeast Asia, has distinct cultural and religious beliefs to Taiwan and Korea. Three major ethnic groups comprise the population – Malay/Bumiputera, Chinese and Indian. State schools are predominantly attended by Malay students with a small proportion of Chinese and Indian students; while Chinese independent schools are almost exclusively attended by students with Chinese heritage. Nevertheless both types of schools promote traditional cultural and religious values, which permeate the curriculum; in addition to compulsory lessons on Islamic and moral education for Muslims and non-Muslims respectively (Ahmad & Salleh, 1997).

The authors therefore hypothesise that Malaysian educators are more likely to report ETB prevalence rates, similar to other Asian studies (Hypothesis 1). Although Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society few studies have been conducted in relation to ethnicity and bullying in schools; largely because of its controversial nature. However, a recent qualitative case study by Salleh

and Zainal (2014) seems to suggest that inter-racial bullying does occur in Malaysian schools, and that educators may even play a role in encouraging racism in the school. The present study therefore seeks to examine whether the ethnicity of the student and educator are related to levels of exposure to ETB, and in particular whether the homogenous or heterogeneous ethnic backgrounds of the student and educator are linked to exposure to ETB (Hypothesis 2).

Thirdly, it is hypothesised that verbal abuse and deliberately ignoring the educator are likely to be the most prominent forms of ETB (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis draws on research which suggests that abuse characterised by lower forms of severity, such as verbal abuse, name calling and insults, are much higher in frequency (De Wet, 2010; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; James, Lawlor, Courtney, Flynn, Henry, & Murphy, 2008)) than more severe forms such as physical abuse, threatening behaviour and damage to personal property (Benefield, 2004; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006).

The study also hypothesises that there will be significant differences in exposure to ETB (Hypothesis 4a) and burnout levels (Hypothesis 4b); depending on the number of years of teaching experience. Maslach et al. (2001) demonstrate that age appears to have a consistent relationship with burnout, with younger employees showing higher levels of burnout. As age is often associated with experience, it is suggested that years of teaching experience is an appropriate variable for identifying such differences. It is therefore predicted that educators with increased experience will exhibit lower levels of burnout. As no previous research has examined the correlation between years of teaching experience and ETB, no specific direction for Hypothesis 4a is proposed.

While it is logical to assume that educators who face increased exposure to ETB will experience increased levels of burnout, it is hypothesised that client or student-related burnout

would be adversely affected by ETB (Hypothesis 5). Because ETB stems from aggressive behaviour by students, it is predicted that the fatigue and exhaustion experienced by educators will be related to their interactions with their clients, i.e. students.

The final aim of this study is to determine whether years of teaching experience moderates the impact of ETB on burnout. Specifically, that increased teaching experience buffers the impact of exposure to ETB on burnout (Hypothesis 6).

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedure*

In order to gain a clear understanding of the nature and extent of ETB and its impact on the well-being of Malaysian educators a total of 1500 questionnaires were distributed to 43 schools in seven states around Peninsular Malaysia; plus one retired educators' group. Although a total of 973 (64.87%) questionnaires were returned only 575 were wholly completed, yielding a response rate of 38.2%.

575 (102 men, 468 women, 5 abstaining) educators from a total of 16 schools around the Peninsular Malaysia were included in the study; which was carried out between January and March 2014. Educators from both government schools and Chinese independent (private) schools participated in the study.

The questionnaires included a cover letter which stated the purpose of the study; assured participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses; and provided the contact details of the research team. The cover letter also provided the definition of ETB by Pervin and Turner (1998). This differentiates ETB from general misbehaviour by emphasising that ETB is of prolonged duration, while misbehaviours are acts committed on a single occasion. The

questionnaire itself comprised an adapted version of Pervin and Turner's (1998) 16-item measure of Teacher Targeted Bullying; the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005); and a range of demographic variables such as age, gender, years of teaching experience over the course of career and in present employment, and whether the perpetrator was of the same ethnic background.

Pervin and Turner's (1998) original measure is primarily categorical in nature. Overall exposure is measured by single-item measure that asks respondents whether they had been subjected to bullying over the duration of their career, answered by indicating yes or no. In order to obtain a more fine-grained measure of exposure, a frequency based response scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always) was added to items pertaining to different forms of ETB; for example verbal abuse, ignoring the educator and so on; enabling educators to indicate the frequency of exposure to each form of ETB.

Surveys were distributed by the counselling department of each school, and schools were given two to three weeks to distribute and collect the surveys. All educators were provided with an envelope in which to seal and return their responses. The questionnaire was proofread by a number of retired educators from both types of schools to ensure that the level of English language was not too difficult. Permission was sought from the Principal/Headmaster of each school prior to distribution of the questionnaires and University ethical approval to carry out the research was obtained prior to data collection.

Descriptive statistics for the study are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for each burnout dimension was carried out to establish the reliability of the instrument. The personal burnout subscale had an  $\alpha = 0.861$ ; work-related

burnout an  $\alpha = 0.850$ ; and student-related burnout an  $\alpha = 0.894$ . No items were removed to increase  $\alpha$  values. Data for personal burnout, frequency of verbal abuse, physical abuse, deliberate ignoring of the educator, spreading rumours, damage to property and other abuses were transformed using a square root transformation to eliminate skew (although it should be noted that sample sizes above 200 often do not deviate enough from normality to make a substantive difference in the analysis) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Cronbach's alpha for the aggregated measure of ETB used in subsequent regression analyses was 0.713.

## **Results**

### *Level and Types of ETB*

A total of 65.2% (n=373) of educators reported that at some time in their career they had suffered or witnessed ETB. Hypothesis 1, which predicted overall prevalence approximate to that of other Asian studies, was therefore disconfirmed. In order to determine whether homogenous or heterogeneous ethnicity between the victim and perpetrator was related to exposure to ETB (Hypothesis 2); a chi square analysis was conducted between the discrepant ethnicity of the perpetrator/victim and exposure to ETB. This result was not significant:  $\chi^2 = 0.758$ , ns.

Prevalence rates for different types of ETB varied considerably; with 49.8% (n=285) of respondents reporting verbal abuse; and 44.4% (n=254) reporting constant ignoring of instructions/requests by the educator as the most prevalent forms of ETB. 13.8% (n=79) of educators reported having been physically abused; 18.2% (n=104) reported students spreading rumours about them; and 14.0% (n=80) reported having property damaged by students. 8.2% (n=47) indicated that they had experienced some other form of ETB such as ignoring homework; writing hateful messages in weekly journals; sexual harassment and purposefully disturbing



classes. Hypothesis 3, which predicted verbal abuse and deliberate ignoring of the educator to be the most prevalent forms of ETB, was therefore confirmed.

#### *Differences in exposure to ETB and burnout by years of teaching experience*

Two separate multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to identify the differences in frequencies of ETB and burnout between the different groupings for years of teaching. Separate MANOVAs were conducted as there was an absence of a good theoretical basis for grouping independent and dependent variables together (Field, 2005). These are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

[Insert Table 2 and Table 3 here]

The MANOVA for years of teaching experience and type of ETB revealed a statistically significant overall effect (Pillai's Trace = 0.140,  $F(30, 2365) = 2.273$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Post hoc analysis on each type of ETB revealed however that only physical abuse, deliberate ignoring of the educator and damage to property were significant. For physical abuse, significant differences were found between 11-15 years and <1 year, 6-10 years, greater than 20 years. Significant differences were also found between 16-20 years and > 20 years age categories. For deliberate ignoring, significant differences were found between 1 years, 6-10 years and 16-20 years; and between 11-15 years and 16-20 years.

For damage to property significant differences were found between <1 year and 1-5 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, and over 20 years. There were also significant differences in damage to property between 6-10 years and 1-5 years, 11-15 years and over 20 years.

Hypothesis 4a, which predicted differences in type of ETB by years of experience, was therefore partially confirmed.

The MANOVA for years of teaching experience and burnout revealed no overall statistically significant differences (Pillai's Trace = 0.040,  $F(15, 1662) = 1.492$ ; ns). Post hoc analysis for each type of burnout however revealed a significant effect for student-related burnout ( $F(5, 554) = 3.192$ ;  $p = 0.008$ ), with significant differences between < 1 year and 16-20 years, 1-5 years and 16-20 years; over 20 years; 6-10 years and 16-20 years; and 11-15 years and 16-20 years. Therefore, more experienced educators experienced lower levels of burnout than less-experienced educators. Hypothesis 4b was therefore partially confirmed.

Different types of ETB were then aggregated to form a total frequency of ETB for subsequent regression analyses. A hierarchical multiple linear regression was conducted to identify the impact of total ETB, years of teaching experience and interaction with each type of burnout. Statistical analyses are shown in Table 4. The results of the regression analysis show that total frequency of ETB significantly predicted increased personal burnout ( $\beta = 0.139$ ,  $t = 2.935$ ;  $p = 0.004$ ); work-related burnout ( $\beta = 0.351$ ,  $t = 3.833$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ); and student-related burnout ( $\beta = 0.490$ ,  $t = 4.995$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The effect was strongest for student-related burnout; followed by work-related burnout; and lastly personal burnout; confirming Hypothesis 5. However years of teaching experience significantly predicted student-related burnout ( $\beta = 0.668$ ,  $t = 3.402$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ); but failed to predict personal burnout ( $\beta = -0.034$ ,  $t = -0.707$ ; ns) and work-related burnout ( $\beta = -0.604$ ,  $t = -1.199$ ; ns).

[Insert Table 4 here]

Results of the moderation analyses revealed that years of teaching experience moderated the relationship between total frequency of ETB and student-related burnout ( $\beta = -0.865$ ,  $t = -2.264$ ;  $p = 0.024$ ) accounting for a further 1% of the variance. Years of teaching experience failed

to exhibit any moderating effect with personal burnout ( $\beta = -0.234$ ,  $t = -0.590$ ; ns) and work-related burnout ( $\beta = -0.286$ ,  $t = -0.730$ ; ns). Hypothesis 6 was therefore partially confirmed.

Graph 1 illustrates the effect of the moderator (years of teaching experience) on the relationship between the total frequency of ETB and student-related burnout. As can be seen from the graph, increased years of teaching are associated with lower levels of burnout where exposure to ETB is high.

[Insert Graph 1 here]

## **Discussion**

### *Prevalence and Types of ETB*

The findings of the present research make an important contribution to knowledge on the nature and extent of ETB in Malaysian schools. The findings suggest that 65.2% of educators have experienced ETB at some point in their career (Hypothesis 1). While findings indicate the overall prevalence of ETB in Malaysian schools to be lower than Pervin and Turner's (1998) UK study (which reported prevalence at 91%) and De Wet and Jacobs' (2006) South African study which reported prevalence at 79.7%; overall prevalence for the present study remains considerably higher than Benefield's (2004) New Zealand study (prevalence at 28%) and Özkılıç's (2012) Turkish study (reported prevalence at 41%). Among the different types of ETB verbal abuse and deliberate ignoring of the educator were found to be the most predominant forms of abuse with prevalence rates of 49.8% and 44.4% respectively; followed by the spreading of rumours at 18.2%, damage to property at 14% and physical abuse at 13.9% (Hypothesis 3). Such findings are consistent with that of previous studies which cite verbal abuse and deliberate ignoring as the most prevalent forms of bullying (Benefield, 2004; De Wet, 2010; De Wet and Jacobs, 2006; James et al., 2008;; Özkılıç, 2012).

However, it is worth highlighting that prevalence statistics for the spreading of rumours, damage to property and physical abuse tend to vary by study and location; with the majority of studies citing physical abuse as the least prevalent form of ETB (with the exception of Özkılıç's (2012) study which cited damage to property as least prevalent). For these three forms of ETB, prevalence rates were lower than those cited in previous studies (Pervin & Turner, 1998; Özkılıç, 2012). However prevalence statistics from the present study suggest that Malaysian educators are exposed to considerable ETB.

As Malaysia is a multi-ethnic population, the study explored whether ethnicity of the perpetrator and victim played a role in exposure to ETB (Hypothesis 2). Results suggested however that this was not the case. This finding (although non-significant) underlines the importance of ETB as a problem unconnected to ethnic divisions within Malaysian society. Solutions to tackling ETB, as discussed later, should therefore be tailored accordingly.

### ***Differences in years of teaching, ETB, and burnout***

Previous research utilising the CBI among educators reports burnout means in the region of 43.0 for personal burnout, 41.5 for work-related burnout and 40.4 for student-related burnout (Milfont et al., 2008). From Table 1 it can be seen that Malaysian educators exhibit above average levels of personal burnout and work-related burnout with increased teaching experience; with the exception of the 16-20 years category. For student-related burnout however, the pattern is less clear. Malaysian educators exhibit higher than average levels of student-related burnout until 16 years; after which student-related burnout levels dip below average.

The present study also reveals differences in burnout levels in different categories of teaching experience (Hypothesis 4b). Educators with more teaching experience exhibited lower

levels of student-related burnout, partially confirming Hypothesis 4b. Prevalence rates for ETB tended to both increase and decrease with years of teaching experience; however the general pattern showed that educators face increased exposure to ETB in the early stages of their teaching career; after which it decreases from 6-10 years, and then increases again from 11 years onwards (Hypothesis 4a).

Research has consistently shown that the frequency of bullying decreases as age increases (Q'Moore, Kirkham, & Smith, 1997). Such research however is based on peer to peer bullying; or educators bullying students. As age increases it is more difficult to carry out bullying, as victims become more capable of defending themselves (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). One plausible explanation for these results is that educators face similar levels of ETB although more experienced educators (e.g. Head of Year) are more likely to occupy positions of authority where they may be responsible for carrying out disciplinary action against students. As a result these educators become more likely targets of ETB. It is also plausible that the threat of punishment could be interpreted as a form of provocation for students to bully educators who, in turn, are more likely to be at the receiving end of ETB. The eventual decrease in physical abuse for educators with over 20 years of experience could be attributed to the possibility that such educators occupy more senior administrative positions (e.g. Headmaster or Principal), and thus have more limited contact with students.

### *Effects of ETB on Burnout*

Hypothesis 5 predicted that educators who suffer from increased exposure to ETB would exhibit higher levels of burnout. The results from the hierarchical linear regression analysis

show that exposure to ETB has a negative impact on educator health and well-being, which is in line with Smith and Brain's (2000) review of two decades of bullying research.

For Malaysian educators, the impact of exposure to ETB is strongest for student-related burnout, followed by work-related burnout and lastly, by personal burnout. These findings highlight the potential negative implications of exposure to ETB on burnout and on student-educator relationships in particular. Although levels of student-related burnout in the current sample are generally lower than that of personal or work-related burnout, and more similar to levels in other published studies; it is this domain that is most adversely affected by exposure to ETB. Because ETB stems from students behaving aggressively towards their educators it is logical that such behaviour will have a negative impact on educators' attitudes and subsequent behaviour towards students which in turn, could have a negative impact on the learning experience and educational system as a whole. These implications are discussed in the next section.

The final hypothesis (Hypothesis 6) predicted that years of teaching experience would moderate the relationship between the total frequency of ETB and burnout. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed; with years of teaching experience moderating the relationship between ETB and student-related burnout only. One possible explanation for this finding is that teaching experience only affects the relationship between exposure and burnout when exposure levels are high. This finding also highlights the importance of experience in developing a sense of mastery over student-educator relationships and classroom management (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

To summarise, as educators gain experience they gain knowledge and develop strategies for dealing with the demands created by ETB, thus accounting for the reduction in student-related burnout.

#### *Potential impact of ETB on the School and Education System*

While many educators believe that ETB occurs because students emulate their peers or do not value their education; its impact on their work and their students is clear. The present study found that approximately 25% of educators would tolerate more disruptive behaviours from students during classes lower expectations and restrict activities with students, simply because they experienced ETB. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the negative influence of ETB on teaching and learning (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; James et al., 2008, Pervin & Turner, 1998). When questioned how they handled ETB, 41.4% of educators simply stated that they lowered their expectations of students in general. This raises concerns that ETB may affect the performance of schools, and ultimately the effectiveness of the education system. While research has shown that educators leave the profession because of ETB (Chen & Astor, 2009); none of the educators in this study reported having considered doing so (although it is acknowledged that this may be due to other factors such as the lack of teaching opportunities).

#### **Implications, Limitations and Recommendation for Future Studies**

The authors acknowledge that the present study is not without its limitations. The sample size of 575 cannot be used to represent the 14,000 educators in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the attempt to include a diverse sample from a number of schools in peninsular Malaysia is a

credible attempt at studying the problem of ETB in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian region. As the present study is cross-sectional in nature, relationships between exposure and health remain tenuous and in order to establish causality between the relationship of ETB and health, longitudinal research is needed.

The present study has shown that teaching experience moderates the effect of ETB on student-related burnout. Future research examining coping strategies of more experienced educators in dealing with ETB could assist in identifying effective strategies for coping with student-related burnout and discovering whether more experienced educators have learned effective ways of dealing with problematic students or are simply desensitized by long exposure to ETB.

Research has shown that effective disciplinary systems do not necessarily reduce the frequency of student misbehaviour (Hart, Wearing, & Conn, 1995). Therefore, governments and schools may wish to consider ways of supporting educators who face ETB. The lack of support provided to educators could result the imbalance of power that makes ETB possible (Smith & Brain, 2000) and leads to a collapse in trust between educators and the educational system (De Wet, 2010). There is also much to be done in terms of educating the public and parents about ETB; both could play an important role in supporting educators in combatting bullying at school (Plaford, 2006).

Future research could examine potential differences in ETB prevalence within rural and urban schools. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has worked to reduce discrepancies in the support and resources provided to these two types of schools and identifying differences in ETB within urban and rural schools could provide useful insight for both staff training development interventions; and student behaviour intervention programmes. While the study documented five



forms of abuse and their aggregate effects, future research could examine the nature and impact of specific forms of abuse - such as that of harassment through social media, which has become more accessible to students of all ages in recent years.

### ***Conclusion***

The present study addresses a perceived gap in research literature on the nature and extent of ETB in Malaysian schools and its potential negative effect on educator burnout. As ETB continues to be a growing problem in schools around the world, awareness should be raised in order to shift the existing mindset that ETB is merely a result of ill-qualified and inexperienced educators and that all stakeholders must take responsibility for the problem. Only then can researchers, educators and decision makers in the education system come together to address the issue of ETB.

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