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Teachers' Attitudes Towards Overt and Covert Bullying, and Perceived Efficacy to Intervene

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Abstract: Covert bullying has become a serious problem in Australian schools. Past research has focused on overt bullying, especially physical forms. This study explores teacher characteristics that influence their attitudes and responses to covert bullying. Responses to three scales measuring teacher attitudes towards bullying, perceived self-efficacy and preferred style of handling bullying incidents, as well as background questions were sought from 62 teachers from a Catholic Diocese in Queensland. Overt bullying incidents were taken more seriously than covert bullying; victims were shown empathy and intervention was likely. All teachers showed high levels of self-efficacy and were likely to intervene in overt bullying incidents. The most predominant style for handling bullying was one that focused on punishing the bully. Ongoing professional development is warranted to help ease this insidious problem in schools.

Introduction

Bullying has been identified internationally as a problem in schools, threatening the physical, psychological and emotional safety and well being of many students (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2005; Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Smith & Brain, 2000). Every child has the right to feel safe at school and bullying erodes those feelings of safety, thereby violating every child's human rights (Kandersteg Declaration Against Bullying in Children and Youth, 2007). Teachers and school administrators have a duty of care; they must ensure that these rights are upheld. In Australia, it has been reported that 1 in 4 students are bullied on a regular basis (Cross et al., 2009). The National Safe Schools Framework was established in Australia by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs to provide a national approach to handling bullying in Australian schools (DEEWR, 2010)

Bullying is a form of aggression that occurs when a person or persons make use of a power imbalance, with intent to cause hurt or harm to another person over a period of time. The perpetrator, wielding the power, enjoys the experience while the victim feels helpless, and often humiliated (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike, & Afen-Akpaide, 2008; Gini, 2006; Smith & Brain, 2000). Bullying has been classified in various ways. In a dichotomous classification, it may be divided into overt and covert forms. Overt forms are more easily witnessed and include physical acts such as hitting, punching, shoving or kicking, and verbal aggression, such as threats, insults, and name-calling. However, bullying may be covert and as the name suggests includes acts that are not so visible, such as gossiping, enforced social isolation,

negative facial expressions and body language (Crick, 1995; Rigby, 1994). In this study covert bullying is defined as “any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm, characterised by an imbalance of power and is hidden from, or unacknowledged by, adults. It can include the spreading of rumours or attempts at socially excluding others” (Cross et al., 2009, p. 22). Cyber bullying can be regarded as a form of covert bullying that is mediated through the use of technology, such as mobile phones or the Internet, (Li, 2006), however, inclusion of cyber bullying is beyond the scope of this current research and is not dealt with in a significant manner. Covert bullying has been identified in the recent Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence study as a major cause for student concern, with a high prevalence rate of 1 in 6 students being bullied regularly (Cross et al., 2009). Past studies have revealed that not all teachers consider the non-physical covert forms of bullying to be serious and as a result, have not always intervened appropriately (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Boulton, 1997; Craig, et al., 2000; Jacobson & Bauman, 2007; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Covert bullying has been associated traditionally with girls, though it certainly is not confined by gender (Cross et al., 2009). Studies have also shown a relationship with age. Students in Year 4 were subjected to the highest levels of covert bullying, with a prevalence of 65% being reported in research by Cross et al. (2009). As the age of the students increased the numbers dropped with a 35% rate being noted for students in Year 9. However, during the transition between primary and secondary school, a rise in bullying has been observed although with regards to cyber bullying the prevalence was not as high. Rates of less than 10% were recorded with the prevalence increasing with age.

Bullying at school has been associated with health problems. Physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach problems have been reported (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001; Williams, Chambers, Logan & Robinson, 1996; Forero, McLellan, Rissel & Bauman, 1999; Rigby, 1998a). Subjection to prolonged stress for these students has been associated with their poor health (Rigby, 2005). Students from a wide range of levels within schools, subjected to frequent bullying, have been found to have lower levels of mental health (Rigby, 2005). This has been demonstrated by lowered self-esteem (Rigby, 1998a), unhappiness and loneliness (Nansel et al., 2001), anxiety (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006), depression (Bond et al., 2001), and suicide ideation (Rigby, 1998b). Associated with these lowered emotional states is the negative impact on school attendance and performance, as demonstrated by lower academic competence, and increased school absenteeism (Rigby, 1997; Steithauer, Hayer, Peterman & Jugert, 2006). Bullying has been identified as an important risk factor for suicidal ideations and behaviours in adolescents and youth (Rigby & Slee, 1999; Kim, Leventhal, Koh, & Boyce, 2009). Bullies themselves have demonstrated quite healthy levels of self-esteem but may be at risk of experiencing depression (Rigby, 2005) and more often exhibit externalizing behaviours (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Forero et al., 1999; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008).

Recent research has indicated that more severe psychological, health and social problems develop as a consequence of covert bullying compared with overt forms of bullying. It also can inflict greater social isolation and instigate social hopelessness, which in turn can invoke suicide ideation (Cross et al., 2009; Rigby, 2003). Besag (2006) wrote, “...emotional and psychological scars do not heal quickly, the damage caused by such behaviours may be more potent and long-term than physical scars.” (p. 537)

Earlier research that focused on relational, social or indirect aggression, forms of aggression that have strong links to covert bullying, also stressed the serious short-term and long-term effects on the health of students (Gladstone, Parker, & Mahli, 2006). They emphasised the loneliness, isolation, depression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), anxiety (Crick & Bigbee, 1998) and suicidal ideation (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bonanno & Hymel, 2010), as

well as the social and psychological problems that could occur in the future for those individuals (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999).

It is important to look more closely at the teachers within schools and the characteristics of the teachers that influence their responses in bullying cases. They play a vital role in establishing the climate for bullying in schools. Teachers' responses to bullying behaviours influence current and future behaviours of both bullies and victims (De Wet, 2006; DeWet, 2007; Yoon & Kerber, 2003; Yoon, 2004). Empathy for the victim and how serious the teachers perceive the incident to be, impacts upon their likelihood to intervene (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Feeling empathy for the victim means that the teachers are more likely to understand and identify with the experience of being victimised (Eslea & Smith, 2000) and furthermore, empathy has also been linked with helping behaviour (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972, as cited in Craig et al., 2000). Thus, teachers showing greater empathy are more likely to take the situation seriously and accordingly intervene.

Mishna et al. (2005) found that the meaning read into a bullying incident by teachers determined whether they considered the incident to be bullying or normal childhood behaviours. Some teachers thought that non-physical forms of aggressive behaviours were not as serious and did not respond to them in the same manner as they would for overt bullying incidents. They also believed that covert bullying was a normal part of growing up and that teasing would not cause the students too much stress or harm (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Carney, 2008; Casey-Cannon, Hayward & Gowen, 2001; Hanson, 2007). Other teachers who were under the impression that victims of bullying were always socially inept and not assertive, had difficulties in identifying as victims children who seemed quite confident. Some teachers also believed that the behaviours of some students caused them to be victimised, and this belief that they were somehow responsible interfered with the teachers identifying these students as being victims of bullying (Mishna et al., 2005).

Teachers' perceived self-efficacy in handling bullying is an important factor to be taken into consideration with responding to and handling bullying. Research revealed that some teachers did not feel confident in their ability to resolve bullying incidents and that this had an effect on their willingness and ability to involve themselves in dealing with bullying (Mishna et al., 2005; Boulton, 1997). It has also been reported in studies that a gap appears to exist between perceptions held by students and teachers of how often teachers intervened in bullying incidents. Teachers believe that they intervened more frequently than students believed. In one study by Pepler, Craig, Zeigler, and Charach (as cited in Bradshaw et al., 2007) 84% of teachers reported intervening always or often in comparison to the 35% reported by students. When students perceived a lack of teacher intervention (regardless of whether this was intentional or not on the part of the teacher), this served to reinforce both the bullying behaviours of the bully and the sense of helplessness and isolation of the victim (Yoon, 2004). In studies based on student surveys, students have also indicated a reluctance to inform teachers because they believed that their situation was made worse (Rigby & Barnes, 2002; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003), but preferred to speak with friends or their parents. Due to the more discreet manner by which covert bullying occurs, a teacher may not actually be able to observe the bullying happening and therefore, be less able to act upon it (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Gini, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Bradshaw et al. (2007) also commented that teachers respond differently when bullying is directly witnessed compared with when incidents have been reported to them. Teachers would generally tend to witness overt bullying more frequently and would have to rely on student reporting for acts of covert bullying, leading to different levels of responses.

With the recognition that bullying is a pervasive problem within schools and that it comes at a huge cost to the health and well being of its youth, many intervention programmes have been developed. Most schools recognize overt bullying and have established policies

and strategies to deal with this problem. When physical altercations, such as hitting or punching occur, there are clear steps to be followed to deal with the problems. It is apparent therefore, that a high priority has been conferred to physical bullying and as such quite a few schools amongst other policies have zero tolerance policies in place (Limber & Small, 2003). However, as Orpinas, Horne and Staniszewski (2003) have discussed, these zero tolerance policies with the focus being on punishment rather than finding solutions may in themselves, be problematic. To avoid punishment students tend to seek out other methods less likely to be detected by teachers and other school personnel. That is, they will try to use methods that will not be obvious to teachers and other adults or perhaps, methods that they perceive not to be taken as seriously by teachers and other adults (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Intervention strategies that have the greater chance of success are ones that use a whole school approach. It is anticipated that increased cooperation between staff and students would improve the school climate and the social norms that surround bullying within a school (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Cross et al., 2009; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003).

The purpose of the current study is to explore the attitudes and beliefs of teachers because of the influence of their behaviours in response to covert bullying. It is hoped that the results may add to the present understanding of teachers' roles in covert bullying in Australian schools and by adding to this knowledge, help to reduce the insidious problem of covert bullying in Australian schools. The factors integral to the teachers' attitudes to different bullying behaviours are explored: perceived seriousness of the incidents, empathy with the victim, and likelihood of intervention. These factors are based on methodology and scales used by Yoon (2004), and Yoon and Kerber (2003). Perceived self-efficacy of the teachers is examined based on a modified scale used by Yoon (2004). Finally, using Rigby's Handling Bullying Scale for Teachers, the preferred methods in handling bullying incidents were studied.

Based on the previous statements, the hypotheses for this research are as follows:

Hypothesis I: The overt forms of bullying will be taken more seriously than the covert forms of bullying.

Hypothesis II: A higher level of empathy will be demonstrated to victims of overt forms of bullying in comparison to covert forms of bullying.

Hypothesis III: Teachers would be more likely to intervene in more events where overt forms of bullying have occurred.

Hypothesis IV: Teachers who demonstrate higher levels of efficacy will be more likely to intervene with bullying events.

Hypothesis V: Teachers will use intervention methods that focus on punishment of the bully.

Methodology

Design

A survey was used in the form of a self-administered paper copy questionnaire. Sampling was opportunistic and thus no random selection of teachers was undertaken. The questionnaire was anonymous.

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 62 teachers from 26 Catholic schools in the Cairns Diocese, mean age of 39.46 years, $SD = 10.67$, their ages spanning from 21 to 61 years. The sample contained more females than males as is typical in this profession, with 45 female

teachers (mean age of 39.42 years, $SD = 10.80$) and 17 male teachers (mean age of 39.53, $SD = 10.29$). The mean years of teaching experience was 14.01 years, $SD = 10.54$, ranging from 6 months to 40 years. The teachers were all qualified teachers most of which held Bachelors in Education (66.12%), but with 24.20% holding a Diploma and 9.67% holding a Masters in Education. In addition to classroom teachers, some of the teachers were in positions of responsibility, including pastoral care (year level) coordinators, assistant principals and school principals. Teachers were representative of all teaching year levels of schooling, from preparatory level to Year 12. Approximately half of the sample teachers taught junior levels (Year P-5), 22.60% taught in Middle School (Years 6 –9), and 6.50% taught Senior School (Years 10-12). There were small percentages that taught across the year levels.

Over three quarters of the teachers (80.65%) had not experienced any training in bullying during their undergraduate education courses, whilst 19.35% mentioned some teacher education training during their tertiary studies. Some teachers commented that the training was not always focused directly on bullying itself but instead discussed general behaviour management or multiculturalism and inclusivity. Nearly half of the sample (43.50%) had not engaged in any professional development activities on bullying over the past six years. Of the 56.50% who had participated in professional development, nearly three-quarters (71.43%) had spent 5 or less accumulated hours during this period of time.

Just on three-quarters (72.60%) of the teachers had at least some knowledge or a good knowledge of the anti-bullying policies that were in place at their school, whilst just over a quarter (27.40%) claimed to have no knowledge of their school policy. When asked to define bullying there was a range of answers, with few (5%) including all three core characteristics of covert bullying (relational, social or indirect aggression) within their definitions.

Materials

A four-part self-report questionnaire was used which included an information letter and instruction sheet, together with an informed consent form, which the teachers signed, detached from the questionnaire and placed into a drop box provided.

Part 1 consisted of background questions to determine the characteristics of the teachers. The twelve questions determined age, gender, educational level, years teaching experience, position with the school, tertiary training in bullying, professional development in bullying, past personal experience in being bullied, experience in witnessing bullying amongst the students, experience in dealing with bullying situations, knowledge of current school policies on bullying, and a personal definition of what constitutes bullying.

Part 2 investigated attitudes towards bullying by means of the Bullying Attitude Questionnaire (Yoon, 2004). The modified version was based on the Bullying Attitude Questionnaire developed by Craig et al. (2000). It made use of six bullying vignettes (which appear below), which had been again slightly modified to suit them for this study. The vignettes presented 'in the field' scenarios, each with a particular focus on either covert or overt bullying. Included were scenarios involving incidents that were either physical, verbal, cyber, social exclusion and manipulation of social status and position within the peer group. This would permit comparison between overt and covert cases of bullying.

Bullying vignette no 1

At the resource center, you hear a student chant to another child "Teacher's pet, brown-nose, suck, kiss-ass". The child tries to ignore the remarks but sulks at his desk. You saw this happen the other day.

Bullying vignette no 2

Emily and Jane had been best friends. They had a massive argument. The next day Jane's inbox in her email account was full and there were numerous postings on her "my space" page. The emails and postings were rude and offensive. When she looked at her account she realized that a group email had been sent from her own account making racially discriminating comments as well as rude and hurtful comments about all her friends and classmates. She had not written the emails. When friends, Jane had told Emily the passwords to her hotmail and "my Space" accounts.

Bullying vignette no 3

You have allowed the kids in your class to have a little free time because they have worked so hard today. You witness a student say to another student, "No, absolutely not. I already told you that you can't play with us." The student plays alone for the remaining time with tears in her eyes. This is not the first time this child has rejected students from playing.

Bullying vignette no 4

As your students return from their elective class you see a student kick another student without any provocation. Bruising is evident. This student has been known to engage in this type of behavior before.

Bullying vignette no 5

A student has been teased and a nick name has been given to her, which she doesn't like. Her classmates tell her not to take things too seriously and they are only having fun. Often when this student walks around the school grounds other students call out her nick name.

Bullying vignette no 6

Sharon was captain of the netball team, good at tennis, popular with many of the students and well liked by teachers. Gina told her teachers that Sharon had been mean to her and was turning her friends against her. Gina was upset, saying that this had been happening for a few years now and each year she reports it to her teacher.

Following on from these vignettes were items that had been sub-divided into 3 subsections. Subsection 1: The seriousness of the bullying in the vignettes was rated on a five point scale where 1 indicated not at all serious and 5 very serious : *How serious do you rate this conflict?* The Cronbach alpha was measured at .70; and Spearman-Brown, .92. The current study found slightly less reliability at $\alpha=.62$. Subsection 2: The teachers' level of empathy was measured on a five-point scale where 1 represented strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement with the statement *I would be upset by the student's remarks and feel sympathetic to the child being teased.* The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .86; Spearman-Brown was .97 where the present study reported $\alpha=.65$. Subsection 3: The likelihood of intervention was rated on a five-point scale, *How likely are you to intervene in this situation* where 1 indicated not at all likely and 5 very likely. The Cronbach alpha measured at .77 and Spearman-Brown at .94, present study weaker reliability $\alpha=.56$.

Part 3 investigated the level of perceived personal self-efficacy of the teachers in dealing with problem behaviour (Yoon, 2004). There were 5 items that were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from not true (1) to very true (7) (Yoon, 2004). A sample item is *I feel confident to handle a disruptive aggressive student in my classroom.* It was a modified version of the Teacher Efficacy Scale devised by Gibson and Dembo (1984, as cited in Yoon, 2004), which had a Cronbach alpha of .86. For this scale, Spearman-Brown was calculated to be .96. The last two items were reverse scored to prevent a halo effect.

Part 4 of the questionnaire explored how teachers handled the bullying events by means of the Handling Bullying Questionnaire (Rigby, 2002). There were 5 subsections within this measure. Their reported revised alpha values were: Ascribing Responsibility to the Victim (.37), Ascribing Responsibility to the Bully (.68), Ignoring the Bullying (.45), Problem Solving (.58), and a Smoothing Approach (.52). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Scores were summed within each subsection to provide an indication of the preferred style of the teachers for handling bullying incidents. Interested readers can contact the authors for a complete copy of the study questionnaire.

Procedure

The project received the required ethics approval from James Cook University and the Catholic Education Office. A verbal invitation was extended to all teachers attending a conference day for all Catholic schools in the Diocese. Teachers were told of the nature and purpose of the research and that the questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. They were reminded to detach the informed consent forms to preserve anonymity. Questionnaires were handed to the teachers and drop boxes were provided for their return. At the end of the day teachers were reminded about completing the questionnaire and how they could be returned. Emails were sent to Principals of the schools who were not in attendance at the conference day inviting the teaching staff to participate in the study. Three weeks later follow-up emails were sent to the schools present at the conference, reminding them of the study and asking if they needed any more questionnaires and/or if it was possible to pick up any completed surveys. Following those emails more questionnaires and drop boxes were distributed. A final round of emails was sent to all schools and following this, the boxes were collected. One school declined to participate, stating that the teachers were working under pressure and could not afford the time. Some schools did not return any completed questionnaires. This also could have been due to high demands in the workplace.

Results

Sixty-two teachers completed and returned the questionnaire, which gave a return rate of approximately 15%. This was a rather low return rate and could be attributed to the busy lives and demanding workloads experienced by teachers.

The data was assessed for normality. Age of the teachers was normally distributed; however, the scales and sub-scales were not. Although the mean and the trimmed means did not differ greatly (indicating an absence of outliers), the results of the Shapiro-Wilks statistics were significant, indicating a violation of the assumption of normality. Consequently, non-parametric tests were used to analyse the data collected in this study.

First of all tests were run to investigate the attitudes of teachers towards cases of overt and covert bullying, looking for any discrepancies in attitudes between the types of bullying. The subsections explored the level of perceived seriousness, level of empathy to the victim and the likelihood of intervention. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant difference in the level of perceived seriousness between cases of overt and covert bullying, $z = -4.49$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($r = .57$). The median score for perceived level of seriousness for cases of overt bullying ($Md = 8.0$) decreased when the perceived level of seriousness for covert bullying was considered ($Md = 7.0$). A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant difference for the empathy shown to the bullying victim in cases of overt and covert bullying, $z = -5.01$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($r = .64$). The median

score for perceived level of empathy for cases of overt bullying ($Md = 8.0$) decreased when perceived level of empathy for covert bullying ($Md = 7.0$) was considered. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant difference in the likelihood that teachers would intervene in overt bullying incidents compared with the likelihood of intervention in covert bullying incidents, $z = -5.58, p < .001$, with a large effect size ($r = .71$). The median score for the likelihood of intervention in cases of overt bullying ($Md = 9.0$) decreased when the likelihood of intervention for incidents of covert bullying ($Md = 8.0$) were considered. To summarise, in cases of overt bullying the teachers perceived the incidents to be serious, they had empathy for the victim and were likely to intervene during incidents.

Other relationships between the subscales were also explored with correlations using Spearman’s rho. Table 1 reports the correlations for both overt and covert bullying and in regards to teacher characteristics of empathy for the victim, perceived seriousness of the incidents, and the likelihood of their intervention.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Empathy toward victim - Overt	1.00						
2. Empathy toward victim - Covert	.24	1.00					
3. Perceived seriousness- Overt	.64**	.19	1.00				
4. Perceived seriousness- Covert	.19	.62**	.38*	1.00			
5. Likelihood of Intervention - Overt	.45**	-.04	.43**	.05	1.00		
6. Likelihood of Intervention - Covert	.19	.51**	.34**	.66**	.31*	1.00	
7. Teacher Self-Efficacy	.07	.06	.09	.05	.32*	.15	1.00

Table 1. Correlations among teacher variables in response to overt and covert bullying scenarios (N=62)

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

There were some smaller correlations indicating weaker relationships between some of the variables as can be seen in Table 1. Approximately one third of the correlations showed a medium correlation (between .30 and .49) and another quarter showed a large correlation (above .50), indicating quite a strong relationship between the variables. Focusing on the stronger relationships: the relationship between perceived seriousness in overt bullying and the level of empathy for the victim in overt bullying showed a large positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .64, p < .01$, with higher levels of perceived seriousness in overt bullying cases being associated with higher levels of empathy for victims in overt bullying incidents. Similarly, with the relationship between perceived seriousness in covert bullying and the level of empathy for the victim in covert bullying there was a large positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .62, p < .01$, with higher levels of perceived seriousness in covert bullying cases being associated with higher levels of empathy for victims in covert bullying incidents. The relationship between perceived seriousness in covert bullying and the likelihood of intervention in covert bullying revealed a large positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .657, p < .01$, with higher levels of perceived seriousness in covert bullying cases being associated with a higher likelihood of intervention in covert bullying incidents.

Running frequencies established that none of the teachers had scored as ‘low’ in perceived self-efficacy. The relationship between perceived self-efficacy of the teachers and the likelihood of their intervention in bullying incidents was examined by using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient. The non-parametric measure of correlation was used because the basic assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were violated. First the relationship between self-efficacy and overall likelihood of intervention revealed that a significant relationship did not exist. However, investigating self-efficacy and likelihood of

intervention in overt bullying incidents showed there was a medium positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .32$, $n = 62$, $\rho < .05$ (2 tailed), with high levels of self-efficacy associated with high levels of likelihood of intervention. Investigating self-efficacy and likelihood of intervention in covert bullying incidents showed that a significant relationship did not exist between the two variables.

A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated a significant association between gender and perceived self-efficacy, $\chi^2 (1, n=62) = 5.03$, $\rho < .05$, $\phi = .321$. A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated a significant relationship between teachers having completed Professional Development or not and the level of self-efficacy (moderate or high), $\chi^2 (1, n=62) = 3.74$, $\rho < .05$, $\phi = .28$. The relationship between age and self-efficacy was investigated using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and no significant relationship was found. The relationship between years of teaching experience and self-efficacy was investigated using Spearman's rho and no significant relationship was found.

There were 5 styles of handling bullying (Rigby, 2002). Running frequency tests found that the most frequently used style of handling bullying, used by approximately half of the teachers (53.20%), was one that focused on ascribing responsibility to the bully. A small proportion (12.90%) ascribed responsibility to the victim and a third (33.90%) ascribed a problem solving approach when handling bullying incidents. No teachers adopted a smoothing approach or one where bullying was ignored. A Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between gender and style of handling bullying, $\chi^2 (2, n=62) = 1.05$, $\rho > .05$, $\phi = .59$. A Chi-square test for independence revealed that a significant relationship did not exist between completion or absence of Professional development and style of handling bullying incidents.

Discussion

The results of the study supported the first three hypotheses. Overt bullying incidents were perceived by teachers to be more serious than were cases of covert bullying. Teachers felt more empathy for victims of overt bullying than for those victims of covert bullying. Teachers were also more likely to intervene in overt bullying incidents than they were if the incidents were covert in nature. The fourth hypothesis predicted that teachers demonstrating higher levels of self-efficacy would be more likely to intervene in bullying incidents. This hypothesis was not supported. A closer examination revealed that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to intervene in overt bullying incidents but not covert incidents. The fifth hypothesis was supported, as a greater percentage of the teachers handled bullying incidents by focusing on the bully and ensuring that the bully was suitably punished.

The difference in teacher attitude between covert and overt bullying found in this study confirms findings in previous research (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Boulton, 1997; Jacobson & Bauman, 2007; Mishna et al., 2005; Yoon and Kerber, 2003; Yoon, 2004). The more traditional overt forms of bullying are well known and understood. Thus as expected, teachers take overt forms of bullying more seriously, show greater empathy for the victim and usually intervene to stop the behaviours. There would be serious consequences from the community if teachers had witnessed or knew of physical altercations and had not dealt with them effectively. However, in comparison, the story with covert bullying is different. When teachers took covert bullying seriously, they were empathetic to the victims, and highly likely to intervene, which is a distinct positive. The concerning part of this, however, is that covert bullying on the whole is not taken as seriously as overt bullying; and knowing the serious health implications for its victims only serves to intensify these concerns (Besag, 2006).

Covert bullying behaviours may not be taken as seriously because some teachers perceive these behaviours to be a normal part of growing up that children must endure and that they would not suffer harm or stress from it (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Carney, 2008; Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Hanson, 2007).

Whether teachers view bullying as serious is also strongly linked with empathy for the victims. As reported in past studies (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Craig et al., 2000; Eslea & Smith, 2000; Mishna et al., 2005) empathy is an important influence on teachers' attitudes and responses towards bullying. It was found in this study that teachers showing high levels of empathy for students subjected to physical and/or verbal forms of aggression also took those cases seriously and accordingly were very likely to intervene. However, this empathy did not translate across to covert bullying. Teachers who showed empathy for overt bullying victims were not very empathetic to students who had been bullied socially and or relationally by other students. Nor did they take covert cases as seriously and they were less likely to intervene. If teachers were of the opinion that social exclusion and rumour spreading are not bullying behaviours, then it could follow that they would not treat such incidents seriously, nor would they feel empathy for these students.

As mentioned earlier, teachers' responses to bullying have a profound influence on students and the continuation and prevalence of those behaviours (Yoon, 2004). Consequently, when teachers have not responded appropriately to covert bullying, these behaviours have continued. The perpetrators retain their power over the victims and for the victims the feelings of helplessness and isolation persist. Covert bullying victims may be less likely to report the bullying for fear of a dismissive attitude by teachers and backlash by the bullies or because they have seen no consequences for the bullies, thus making it futile to report the problem (Yoon, 2004). Consequently, the health of these students, short term and long term has and will be compromised (Besag, 2006; Crick, Casa & Ku, 1999; Cross et al., 2009, Hazler et al., 2001).

When scrutinizing the definitions of bullying, many of the teachers included in their descriptions comments on physical or verbal aggression, however, less than a third included comments on emotional harm, and of those less than half actually mentioned social exclusion or similar relational forms of aggression typical in covert bullying. One teacher actually made the comment that exclusion is not a form of bullying. Not all teachers mentioned a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim although many did mention that the behaviours were unwanted by the victim. Neither did all the teachers include repetition as a fundamental part of bullying, which had also been noted by Mishna et al. (2005). A lack of a clear precise definition of what constitutes bullying and a distinct absence of covert forms from that definition may then lead to misinterpretation by teachers as to when a child has been bullied, as mentioned earlier. They may also underestimate the depth of the emotional upset that may be caused by the bullying, causing the victim to feel more helpless and less likely to discuss the incidents with adults for fear of having their feelings trivialised. In addition to this, if the policy and procedures in place at the school do not include covert bullying, then without support, dealing with covert bullying would be extremely difficult.

Reviewing the teachers' training both before and after gaining their education degrees, and their definitions of bullying could provide some insight into the different attitudes to overt and covert bullying. The majority of teachers in this study reported a lack of training in bullying during their undergraduate education courses at University. Some teachers who did receive training stated that it was in the area of policy development, multiculturalism and inclusivity, behaviour management but not specifically on bullying. When teachers have begun their work of teaching, they have opportunities to participate in ongoing training, or Professional Development. It was revealed in this study that only a small proportion of teachers had engaged in relevant training in bullying over the past 5 years.

Training older than this does not provide the most current trends in education in a field that constantly evolves. Thus the opportunity to update knowledge whilst teaching in a school, which would be the time when it is most useful, is diminished. The reasons why teachers have not participated in workshops or seminars may be due to reduced funding available to support teachers attending conferences and workshops; a shortage of suitable training courses available; or teachers being so busy that when prioritising, this has not appeared to be as important at the time. As noted in other studies (Bouton, 1997) some teachers wrote comments saying that they would welcome training in this area.

It should be noted that students' covert bullying is not always easy to observe or detect. Students are quite accomplished at hiding these behaviours from adults (Cross et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2000; Jacobson & Bauman, 2007). Thus teachers may not be aware of the occurrence of the bullying because the acts are covert in name and nature. Skills training specifically in bullying could help with recognition and identification of the various forms. Methods for student reporting of being bullied or witnessing covert bullying, without creating problems for those students amongst their peer group should be explored. This could include such ideas as drop boxes or whole school confidential auditing on a regular basis.

An interesting result came from this study when examining teacher efficacy. It was noticed that enhanced self-efficacy in dealing with bullying was related not to advancing age or increasing years of teaching experience but rather with the experience of participating in professional development activities. It would seem that teachers who have attended seminars and workshops in bullying have felt more able to deal effectively with bullying. However, bearing in mind that the teachers felt more able to deal with overt bullying, it would seem that in those workshops there needs to be a focus on covert bullying so that teachers may feel better able to handle these incidents too.

When considering that the most common handling method of dealing with bullying was to focus on the bully, this falls in line with zero tolerance approaches with a focus on punishing bullies rather than sorting out the relationship problems that exist between students. As suggested by Rigby and Bradshaw (2003) a non-punitive approach to handling bullying where the informants are offered protection should enhance the co-operation between students and staff so that the prevalence of bullying problems may be decreased. This would be particularly helpful when dealing with hidden, behind the scenes covert bullying; cases that need to be brought to the attention of teachers so that they can be dealt with. Cross et al. (2009) suggested that a whole school approach would have a better chance of success in dealing with covert forms of bullying in schools. Bradshaw et al. (2007) stated that involving staff in policymaking would help teachers feel more confident and more supported in dealing with incidents. There was also a small proportion of teachers who placed blame on the victim, considering them to be responsible which corresponds with a discussion by Mishna et al. (2005).

Limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The sample size was relatively small and only Catholic schools (schools where there is a high level of pastoral care for the students) were used in the study. This impinges upon being able to generalise the results to the wider population. Future research should include a larger sample size as well as non-Catholic schools to strengthen the findings of this study and to extend upon what has been revealed. Access to on-line questionnaires may assist in improving the response rate.

Self-reporting was used in collecting data. It is important to take social desirability bias into account: some teachers may have selected responses that were not entirely accurate but instead portrayed themselves in a more favourable manner. In addition to this the Likert scale used could have been improved by the use of an even number of response options thereby forcing teachers to choose either a negative or a positive response. The study could

have been improved with the use of observational data of the teachers in the classroom and the playgrounds. However, this is labour and time intensive and possible in well-funded studies. As part of a 10-point action plan, the National Centre Against Bullying has recommended that undergraduate teachers must study a compulsory unit of bullying prevention and management. If this occurs it would be interesting in the future to investigate the impact that this training may have on teacher attitudes and intervention strategies in covert bullying.

In conclusion, teachers perceive covert forms of bullying as being less serious and they have less empathy for the victim and are less likely to intervene compared with overt forms of bullying. Teachers seem to feel better at dealing with the more overt forms of bullying. Methods most frequently used seem to be ones that focus on punishing the bully, and for covert bullying to be controlled, this method will be detrimental. A lack of effective undergraduate teacher training and ongoing training for teachers may contribute to current teacher attitudes. With better training opportunities and clearly articulated whole school policies and intervention programmes for all forms of bullying, covert bullying may be better managed in schools in the future.

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