

University of Groningen

## Bullying in schools

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The girls pretended to be my friends so that I would tell them all my secrets. They pushed me into a corner, surrounded me, said nasty things, called me names, and threatened me. They pushed me into a puddle of mud and hurt me. I became more anxious, silent, and insecure. They told me to kill myself and said that if I would not do it, they would do it for me. I still suffer from the bullying. All those memories and thoughts... It has been 5 years ago but it still feels like it was yesterday. The bullying really changed me.

*-Anonymous victim on the Internet*

## **1.1 What is school bullying?**

School bullying is a serious problem that many children at some point in their lives face—either by being victimized, by witnessing it, or by bullying others. Bullying is often defined as the systematic and intentional abuse of others (Olweus, 1993). Power imbalance is an important element of bullying: bullies are physically or socially stronger than their victims, making it particularly difficult for the victims to defend themselves. Common forms of bullying are physical bullying (e.g., hitting or kicking), verbal bullying (e.g., insulting or name-calling), relational bullying (e.g., gossiping or excluding), material bullying (e.g., damaging or stealing belongings), and cyber bullying (e.g., posting mean messages on social media), but bullying can manifest itself in many more ways. About 15% to 25% of the elementary school and secondary school students are bullied (Klicpera & Gasteiger Klicpera, 1996; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Bullying is especially prominent during middle childhood and early adolescence (ages 6 to 14) (Olweus, 1993). A commonly heard misconception about bullying is that it is typical childhood behavior without serious ramifications. On the contrary: several studies demonstrated that bullying can have far-reaching negative consequences for the current and later well-being of those who are bullied, those who witness the bullying, and even for those who bully (Isaacs, Hodges & Salmivalli, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Scholte et al., 2007). What makes school bullying particularly distressing is that victims have to interact with their bullies on a daily (involuntary) basis and have little chance of avoiding them.

## **1.2 Teachers and classmates: Three insights**

In the past decades much progress has been made in understanding the underlying mechanisms of school bullying. It is now understood that bullying is not merely a negative interaction between bullies and victims, but that it is a complex phenomenon in which teachers and classmates, other important actors within the classroom context, are involved as well. In the remainder of this chapter I first discuss three important insights of the past two decades concerning how teachers and classmates can affect the bullying in their classroom. Next, I discuss which knowledge is still lacking and describe how the four empirical studies that are presented in this dissertation aim to fill this gap. Finally, I provide a detailed overview of the empirical studies.

### **1.2.1 Insight 1: Teachers are important actors within the classroom context**

Teachers are important actors within the classroom context as they spend many hours per day with their students and are responsible for and in control of the events taking place during school hours. Accordingly, in most anti-bullying interventions teachers are the ones who are supposed to signal and solve cases of bullying. Recent studies suggest that teachers' role in tackling bullying goes beyond simply implementing interventions (e.g., Hektner & Swenson, 2011; Veenstra et al., 2014). These studies argue that although teachers are the ones who are supposed to solve bullying, they may simultaneously be part of the problem because they can (unintentionally) reinforce bullying among their students. Teachers function as role models for their students and their perceptions and behavior may affect the bullying process (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Teachers who have permissive attitudes towards bullying—or even give negative verbal and nonverbal reactions to victims—might promote negative interactions (Boulton, 1997; Graubard, 1973). By contrast, teachers who take a firm stance against bullying and propagate anti-bullying norms may create a classroom climate in which bullying is not tolerated.

### **1.2.2 Insight 2: Classmates are the bully's audience**

In order to stop bullying, it is important to understand why students bully. Several explanations for why students bully have been put forward. For instance, it has been argued that students bully because they are insecure or that they have problems regulating their emotions. Today most scholars agree that the main reason why students bully is that they aspire to social status in the peer group (Olthof et al., 2011; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksmas, & Dijkstra, 2010; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). By harassing others—often classmates who are unlikely to be defended—bullies aim to show their strength to the rest of the group. It is thus no coincidence that bullying nearly always occurs in the presence of witnessing peers (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000).

In their pioneering work Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) argued that those witnessing peers determine to a large extent whether bullying is a successful strategy for gaining social status. By supporting or ignoring the bullying, witnessing peers (indirectly) signal to the bully that the bullying is entertaining, or that it at least is acceptable behavior. Conversely, when students disapprove bullying and defend the victim, for instance by telling the bully to stop bullying, bullying is no longer an effective means to climb the social ladder and bullies are likely to alter their behavior.

According to Salmivalli and colleagues, bullying is a group phenomenon in which almost all classmates are in some way involved, even if they do not actively attack the victim. Salmivalli and colleagues distinguished five participant roles (apart from victims) that students may take during bullying episodes: bullies, assistants (students who do not

initiate the bullying but join in later), reinforcers (students who support the bully by laughing or cheering), outsiders (students who actively shy away from the bullying), and defenders (students who help and support victims). Participant roles are typically determined by aggregating the proportion of classmates who nominated a certain student for a specific role.

### **1.2.3 Insight 3: Bullying is a relational phenomenon**

Recently, Dutch researchers (Huitsing et al., 2012; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012; Van Der Ploeg, 2016) carried the idea of the participant role approach a step further. These researchers agreed that bullying is a group phenomenon, but they let go of the notion of the relatively static participant roles. Instead, they argued that students' behavior depends on relationships within the classroom. For instance, students may bully some classmates while they defend others. Moreover, students' behavior may not only depend on their direct (dyadic) relationship with others, but on the presence or absence of other relationships in the classroom as well. As an illustration, the choice to defend a victimized classmate may depend on whether the potential defender dislikes the bully. Software for analyzing social networks nowadays enables researchers to investigate this type of complex relationships more accurately.

## **1.3 Four empirical studies**

Notwithstanding the progress made in understanding the roles that teachers and classmates play in the bullying process, little is known about teachers' and classmates' perceptions of bullying and behavior towards bullying. With 'perceptions' I mean the individual set of beliefs and attitudes that teachers and students have about bullying. I argue that it is important to better understand how teachers and classmates perceive bullying because their perceptions are likely to affect their behavior (e.g., whether they will intervene in bullying episodes in their classroom and with how much effort, persistence, and intensity they will do so) and the perceptions and behavior of others (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Below I elaborate on the specific topics that were addressed in the empirical chapters of this dissertation.

### **1.3.1 Chapter 2**

Teachers are the ones who are supposed to signal and solve cases of bullying and, in addition, they are role models who may reinforce or discourage bullying among their students. Despite this important role of teachers in stopping bullying it is unclear to what

extent teachers' perceptions and behavior are related to the prevalence of bullying. In a few studies teachers' attitudes to and perceptions of bullying were examined, but in none of these studies an explicit link with the prevalence of victimization in their classrooms was made. One study (Veenstra et al., 2014) found higher levels of bullying in classrooms of teachers who according to their students were not efficacious and had to exert a great deal of effort to reduce bullying. In this study teachers' characteristics were reported by students and not by the teachers themselves.

Using data of 139 Dutch elementary school teachers and 3,385 of their students in chapter 2 I investigated whether teachers' characteristics—and in particular teachers' perceptions of bullying—were associated with the number of victims in their classroom. The focus was on teachers' perceptions on the causes of bullying, their self-perceived ability to handle bullying among their students, their personal bullying and victimization history, and their teaching experience.

### **1.3.2 Chapter 3**

Several studies suggest that tackling bullying is a difficult task (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). I argue that at least three conditions have to be met before teachers can successfully intervene in bullying situations in their classrooms: First, teachers need to know what bullying is; second, they need to gather information about the bullying among their students; and third, they need to recognize which students are being victimized. In chapter 3, I present a pilot study in which teachers' definitions of bullying, the strategies they used to find out about bullying, and the extent to which teachers perceived students who were self-reported victims as victims were investigated. Data from 22 Dutch elementary school teachers were combined with survey data from 373 students of these teachers.

### **1.3.3 Chapter 4**

Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) argued that all students are in some way involved in and responsible for the bullying in their classroom. Students' behavior during bullying episodes may make a large difference for the victim. When most students reject the bullying, it is not an effective means to climb the social ladder and bullies are likely to alter their behavior. However, before students can intervene in bullying, they must recognize it as such.

Even though several studies assume that most students are aware which classmates are victimized (e.g., O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996), this assumption has never been tested explicitly in an empirical study. Several studies did investigate the correspondence between peer and self-reported victimization (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Ladd &

Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002), but in most of these studies the self-reports of victims were compared to aggregated peer reports (i.e., the reports of all classmates were aggregated to proportion scores). Previous studies thus neglected that some students may be more likely to recognize victimized classmates than others.

In chapter 4, data from 2,413 Dutch secondary school students were used to investigate whether the classmates of self-reported victims perceived them as victimized. Taking the relational nature of bullying (and bullying related behavior) into account, the correspondence between peer and self-reported victimization was not investigated by comparing self-reports to aggregated peer reports, but to peer reports given by individual students. This dyadic approach allowed investigation of whether students with certain characteristics were more likely to agree on the self-reported victimization of their classmates and whether there was more agreement in certain relationships.

### 1.3.4 Chapter 5

One of the most important participant roles described by Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) is the role of defender. When students defend their victimized classmates this may alter the bully's behavior and provide a buffer against the negative consequences of bullying. Several studies sought to investigate what distinguishes defenders from their classmates. The vast majority of these studies focused on individual characteristics associated with being a defender (e.g., Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Pozzoli, Gini & Vieno, 2012). Although these studies have provided valuable insight into defending behavior, nearly all of them ignored the fact that defending is intrinsically relational. Rather than always *being* a defender (i.e., having a fixed role), students' behavior is likely to be *flexible*; students may defend certain classmates but remain passive when other classmates are victimized.

In order to properly take this relational nature of defending into account, in chapter 5 I investigated defending relationships in Dutch elementary schools using social network analysis. In social network analysis the focus is not on individual-level outcomes but on the presence or absence of relationships between individuals within a certain social group. I investigated to what extent defending relationships co-occurred with two common types of positive and negative relationships among elementary school students: friendship and dislike. It was expected that defending was likely to occur between friends and between friends of friends. In addition, it was expected that defending was unlikely to co-occur with dyadic dislike relationships. Finally, it was expected that defending relationships were likely to occur between students who were disliked by the same classmates and between students who disliked the same classmates. Bivariate Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGMs) were used to investigate the defending, friendship and dislike networks in seven elementary school classrooms.

## 1.4 Overview of the empirical chapters

Table 1.1 shows how the four empirical chapters are organized.

	<b>Perceptions of bullying</b>	<b>Behavior towards bullying</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	Chapters 2 & 3	Chapter 3
<b>Classmates</b>	Chapter 4	Chapter 5

In short, chapter 2 investigated how teachers' characteristics—in particular their perceptions of bullying—were related to the number of self-reported victims in their classrooms. Chapter 3 investigated whether teachers were prepared to tackle bullying by examining their perceptions of what bullying is and which students were victimized, and what strategies they used to find out about bullying. Chapter 4 investigated whether the classmates of self-reported victims perceived them as victimized. Finally, chapter 5 investigated the extent to which defending relationships co-occurred with friendship and dislike relationships. Table 1.2 shows the details of the four empirical studies.

**Table 1.2** Details of the four empirical chapters

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Research question</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Mean age</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Dependent variable</b>
Chapter 2	Are teacher characteristics associated with the number of victims in the classroom?	3,385 Dutch elementary school students and 139 teachers in 146 classrooms	9.8	Poisson regression	Classroom victimization rate
Chapter 3	Are teachers prepared to tackle bullying?	373 Dutch elementary school students and 22 teachers in 18 classrooms	10.7	Mixed-methods	Data of individual teachers and students
Chapter 4	Do classmates of self-reported victims perceive these students as victimized?	2,413 Dutch secondary school students in 115 classrooms	13.3	Three-level logistic regression	Reporter-receiver agreement
Chapter 5	To what extent do defending relationships co-occur with friendship and dislike relationships?	161 Dutch elementary school students in 7 classrooms	9.4	Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGMs)	Defending, friendship, and dislike relationships