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Bullying in schools

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Chapter 6

General conclusions and discussion

6.1 Investigating the role of teachers and classmates

School bullying, the systematic and intentional abuse of students who cannot easily defend themselves, poses a substantial threat to the current and later well-being of those who are bullied, those who witness the bullying, and those who bully (Isaacs, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008; Olweus, 1993; Scholte et al., 2007). In the past two decades much progress has been made in understanding the underlying mechanisms of bullying. It is now understood that bullying is a complex phenomenon in which teachers and classmates play important roles. More specifically, it is understood that teachers are important actors within the classroom context (e.g., Hektner & Swenson, 2011; Veenstra et al., 2014), that classmates are the bully's audience (Salmivalli et al., 1996), and that bullying is a relational phenomenon (Huitsing et al., 2012; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012).

In this dissertation I presented four empirical studies in which I further investigated the role that teachers and classmates play in handling bullying. More specifically, I investigated teachers' and classmates' perceptions of and behavior towards bullying. Chapter 2 investigated how teachers' characteristics—in particular their perceptions of bullying—were associated with the number of victims in their classroom. 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 6.1 provides an overview of the findings per topic. In the following sections I discuss the main findings and implications of the four empirical studies. In addition, I discuss directions for future research and practical recommendations.

Table 6.1 Overview of findings per topic		
	Perceptions of bullying	**Behavior towards bullying**
Teachers	• More students reported to be victimized in classrooms of teachers who believed that bullying could be attributed to external factors (chapter 2) • More students reported to be victimized in classrooms of teachers who perceived that they were able to handle bullying among students (chapter 2) • More students reported to be victimized in classrooms of teachers who had a personal history of bullying others (chapter 2) • Teachers gave incomplete definitions of bullying (chapter 3) • Teachers often did not recognize self-reported victims (chapter 3)	• Teachers used limited strategies to find out about bullying (chapter 3)
Classmates	• Students in same-gender dyads were likely to recognize self-reported victims (chapter 4) • Students who behaved as outsiders were unlikely to recognize self-reported victims (chapter 4) • Students who behaved as defenders were likely to recognize self-reported victims (chapter 4) • Students were unlikely to agree on the victimization of students who reported that they had been victimized sometimes (chapter 4)	• Victimized students were likely to be defended by students who they nominated as a friend or who nominated them as friend (chapter 5) • Defending was more likely to occur when the victim and potential defender were both nominated as a friend by the same classmates (chapter 5) • Victimized students were unlikely to be defended by classmates whom they disliked or who disliked them (chapter 5) • Defending was likely to occur between students who disliked the same classmates (chapter 5)

6.2 Main findings and implications

6.2.1 Teachers and bullying: unprepared or afraid?

Chapter 2 showed that teachers' characteristics were associated with the number of victims in the classroom. There were more self-reported victims when teachers attributed bullying to external factors (i.e., factors outside their control), when teachers perceived that they were able to handle bullying behavior among their students, and when teachers had a personal history of bullying others. Although the explorative character of chapter 2 implies that these findings need to be interpreted cautiously, these findings suggest that teachers' perceptions and personal experience rather than fixed characteristics, such as teachers' work experience or gender, affected the prevalence of victimization.

Previous studies showed that teachers' perceptions about bullying are not always accurate. For instance, Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) found that whereas teachers believed that they were sufficiently aware of the bullying in their classrooms, their students thought they were only aware of a fraction of all the bullying episodes. Consistent with this study, chapter 2 suggests that some teachers had inaccurate perceptions about bullying. For instance, even though tackling bullying is generally considered a difficult task (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004) some of the teachers indicated that they found it (very) easy to handle bullying behavior among their students. In the classrooms of those teachers the prevalence of bullying was the highest, which suggests that these teachers overestimated their own capacities or that they underestimated the complicated nature of bullying.

Inaccurate perceptions were also found in chapter 3. Even though the teachers in chapter 3 had been participating in an anti-bullying program for at least one year, and throughout the program the core elements of bullying were regularly emphasized, none of them provided a complete definition of bullying. This finding is consistent with the study of Bauman and Del Rio (2005) who found that the majority of the investigated (trainee) teachers did not have a clear understanding of the definition of bullying. Moreover, only a few of the self-reported victims were perceived as victims by their teachers. Some teachers argued that their students exaggerated their victimization. In addition, several teachers gave victim nominations to students who according to their self-reports were not victimized.

These findings are worrying because teachers' perceptions affect whether they will intervene in bullying episodes in their classroom and with how much effort, persistence, and intensity they will do so (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Moreover, teachers function as role models for their students and their perceptions may affect the bullying process (Poulou & Norwich, 2002). Even though teachers have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. This impression is supported by the finding that teachers used limited strategies to find out about bullying. Based on the results of chapters 2 and 3, I agree with previous scholars (e.g., Hektner & Swenson, 2011; Veenstra et al., 2014) who argued that teachers should not only be seen as *implementers* of anti-bullying interventions, but also as *targets* of these interventions.

In order to effectively target teachers in anti-bullying interventions it is important to better understand why teachers have inaccurate perceptions of bullying. It could be that

they did not have enough knowledge about bullying, but it is also possible that teachers gave socially desirable answers. As in many other countries, there is a strong anti-bullying climate in the Netherlands. A general awareness of suicide as a consequence of bullying has emerged after recent suicide cases by adolescents and young adults. Without doubt more attention for the possible negative consequences of bullying is a positive development, but a downside of this may be that teachers are afraid to admit that there is bullying in their classroom or that they have problems stopping bullying. Accordingly, teachers may deny that their students are actually victimized and claim that if there would be bullying in their classroom, they could easily stop it.

6.2.2 Identifying victims of bullying

I argue that when teachers and classmates do not perceive certain students as victimized, it is unlikely that they will intervene and help these students when they are bullied. Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that numerous students who were self-reported victims were not perceived as victims by their teachers or classmates. Only a few teachers and classmates gave victim nominations to all self-reported victims. These findings are of potential concern as they may suggest that teachers and classmates are insufficiently aware of the victimization in their classroom. However, it may also be that teachers and classmates suspect bullying but rather ignore it or underestimate its severity by regarding it as not *really* bullying. The idea of being at least partially responsible for the victim's suffering potentially causes teachers and classmates to experience mental stress and discomfort (i.e., cognitive dissonance). A simple method for eliminating these negative feelings is by denying that the victim is actually bullied (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003).

An alternative explanation for why students' self-reported victimization does not overlap with reports of classmates and teachers is that students exaggerated their victimization. Some teachers in chapter 3 argued that this was the case and also in previous studies (e.g., Graham & Juvonen, 1998) it was argued that students may over-report their victimization. Students may for instance over-report their victimization because they misperceive certain behavior as bullying (i.e., 'paranoid' victims, Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

As in nearly all studies on this topic, it was impossible to disentangle why certain self-reported victims were not perceived as victims by their teachers and classmates (Bouman et al., 2012; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Without consensus on an objective method for determining whether a student is actually victimized, typically reports of different informants (e.g., students, teachers, and parents) are used to identify victims of bullying (Bouman et al., 2012; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). When all informants agree on the victimization of a certain student, it seems safe to assume this student is actually (not) victimized. However, when the reports of different informants are discrepant, identifying victims becomes more problematic. A rational guideline would be to take self-reported victims seriously, even though others do not perceive these students as victimized. After all, it is the perceived victimization rather than the actual victimization that affects the victim's well-being. Moreover, when teachers, classmates, or parents perceive that a certain

student has been victimized but this student did not report being victimized, this information should be taken seriously as well, because students might deny their own victimization (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). For instance because they feel ashamed or are afraid of potential reprisals from the bullies. In short, I contend that when students report they have been victimized, or are reported as victims by others, they should be considered victimized.

Focusing on which students were perceived as victims by *individual* classmates allowed investigating whether certain students were more competent in reporting the victimization of their classmates. It was found that students who behaved as outsiders during bullying episodes (i.e., students who actively shied away from the bullying) were less likely to give victim nominations to self-reported victims, and in contrast, students who behaved as defenders (i.e., reporters who helped and supported victims) were more likely to give victim nominations to self-reported victims. Future studies may further investigate whether some teachers or students are better able to recognize victimized students than others. For instance, future studies could investigate whether teachers who provided more complete definitions of bullying and used more effective strategies to find out about bullying were more successful in recognizing victimized students. Moreover, it was found that students who were victimized sometimes were less likely to be perceived as victims by their classmates than students who were victimized often or very often. Future studies could investigate whether some victims are easier to recognize (e.g., victims of more visible forms of bullying) than others. Using social network analysis, future studies may not only investigate whether teachers and classmates recognize victimized students, but may also examine whether they know *who* bullies *whom*. It is plausible that teachers would be better able to tackle bullying when they have accurate perceptions of who bullies whom.

6.2.3 Defending

Defending is important behavior: it may alter the bully's behavior and can provide a buffer against the negative consequences of bullying (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Even though most students seem to hold negative attitudes towards bullying, they rarely defend their victimized classmates (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). A possible explanation for this is that students do not perceive their victimized classmates as victimized, as found in one study where students argued that some classmates were not *actually* bullied (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). It seems plausible that students will not stand up for classmates whom they do not consider to be bullied. Chapter 4 investigated this topic by comparing self-reported victimization to peer reported victimization. A dyadic approach was used which allowed investigation of whether students with certain characteristics were more likely to agree on the self-reported victimization of their classmates than others and whether there was more agreement in certain relationships. The results show that students who behaved as defenders were more likely to recognize victimized students. This could imply that recognizing that certain students are victimized leads to defending. However, the use of cross-sectional data implies that no conclusions on the causal direction of this relationship

can be drawn. It is also possible that defending victimized classmates leads to better recognition or that there is a two-way causal relationship.

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. I predicted that defending was likely to occur between friends and between friends of friends. I also hypothesized that defending was unlikely to co-occur with dyadic dislike relationships. Finally, I hypothesized that defending relationships were likely to occur between students who were disliked by the same classmate and between students who disliked the same classmate. The findings of chapter 5 show that victimized students were indeed likely to give defending nominations to students who they also nominated as a friend or who nominated them as friend. Moreover, defending was likely to occur when the victim and (potential) defender were both nominated as a friend by the same classmates. Victimized students were unlikely to give defender nominations to classmates whom they disliked or who had indicated to dislike them. Finally, defending was likely to occur between students who disliked the same classmates. Chapter 5 also demonstrated that gender affected defending relationships, but that the strength of the gender effects varied per classroom. Given that the strength of the effects varied per classroom, it seems classroom characteristics affect defending behavior as well. This may imply that anti-bullying interventions are not equally effective in all classrooms.

6.2.4 The classroom composition matters

Although not the focus of this dissertation, the studies presented in this dissertation underline the need to take the classroom composition into account when investigating ways to stop bullying. Chapter 5 demonstrated that defending behavior varied per classroom. Moreover, chapter 4 demonstrated that students were less likely to perceive self-reported victims as victimized in classrooms with more students. A possible explanation for this finding is that in classrooms with more students it is less likely that all classmates know each other well. Thus, students in larger classrooms may have less information about social interactions between classmates than students in smaller classrooms. Consistent with this explanation, it was recently found that there was less bullying when students knew each other better (Van Den Berg, 2015).

The classroom composition also mattered in chapter 2. In that chapter was found that there were less victimized students in multi-grade classrooms. A possible explanation for this finding is that there is less competition in multi-grade classrooms. This explanation fits the evolutionary approach that Ellis and colleagues (2012) use to better understand bullying. From an evolutionary perspective, bullying can be seen as a strategy to obtain and control valuable physical, social, or sexual resources (e.g., food or social status). It is plausible that in multi-grade classrooms there is less need for competition over these resources, because due to the mix of older and younger students there is a natural social hierarchy.

6.3 Directions for future research

The use of cross-sectional data and small-scale samples implies that the findings of the studies presented in this dissertation should be interpreted carefully. Future studies are needed to corroborate whether teachers indeed have inaccurate perceptions of bullying and are not fully prepared to tackle bullying. These studies should not only focus on teachers' 'shortcomings', but also investigate how bullying affects teachers. Moreover, future studies should investigate whether recognition of victimized classmates indeed leads to defending these classmates.

The findings of this dissertation might be extended to bullying at work, a topic recently receiving a lot of (media) attention in the Netherlands. A work context in which people are not free to choose their coworkers may bear sufficient similarities to the classroom setting, where the group process may not only lead to friendship, but also to bullying and defending behavior.

I particularly hope that future studies will follow up on the finding that teachers and classmates do not seem to recognize victimized students. I argue that this finding is worrying given that teachers and classmates are unlikely to help and support students whom they do not perceive as victimized. Future studies could not only investigate whether teachers and classmates know who the victims are, but also investigate whether they know *who* bullies *whom*. Moreover, these studies could investigate perceptions of teachers and classmates on other relationships such as friendship, dislike, and defending.

Studies on cognitive social structures (CSS) could provide a useful framework for future research (e.g., Krackhardt, 1987; Neal, Neal & Cappella, 2013). CSS studies investigate individuals' perceptions of the social structures within a given social context. In CSS studies individuals report on the relationships between all other actors in the social context. Different reports (e.g., students and teachers) are subsequently compared.

Cognitive networks might also be a good starting point to discuss the situation in the classrooms with the teachers. In the study presented in chapter 3, teachers were asked for the names of victimized students. After the interviews some teachers were curious about the agreement between their perceptions of the victims in their classroom and the reports of the students; indicating that they were not fully sure about their own answers. Perhaps this curiosity could serve as a starting point for discussing the situation in the classroom with teachers. A coach could discuss teacher's victim nominations with the teacher and compare these with students' reports.

6.4 Practical recommendations

Based on the presented findings four practical recommendations can be made.

6.4.1 Improve teachers' knowledge about bullying

Teachers play central roles in tackling bullying. Yet they seem not fully equipped for this task. I argue that anti-bullying programs and teacher trainings should spend more time

educating teachers about bullying. Based on the findings presented in this dissertation I argue that more emphasis should be placed on what bullying exactly is and on the severe consequences it may have. Teachers should be made aware that bullying happens in almost every classroom (also their classroom!) and that it tends to happen in places where they cannot see it. They should also be made aware of the fact that students tend to be reluctant to inform their teachers about the bullying. In other words, it is important that teachers realize that even when they do not see or hear about bullying, it does not mean that it does not happen. Moreover, teachers should understand that bullying is a complex phenomenon and that it is often difficult to pinpoint the exact cause. Finally, teachers should be made aware that they have a responsibility to intervene when bullying occurs and that they should take signs of bullying seriously, even when they have the feeling these signals are wrong.

6.4.2 Set realistic goals

At the same time it is important that teachers and the people around them (e.g., the school management and parents) have realistic goals. As shown in chapter 2, there are almost no classrooms where no students are victimized at all. Bullying is a complex phenomenon and it seems unrealistic to expect that teachers can completely eradicate it. It should be stressed that the occurrence of bullying does not mean that teachers are not doing their job well. By underlining the complex nature of bullying, teachers may feel more comfortable to admit that there is bullying in their classroom and that they sometimes do not know how to stop it. It should be stressed that teachers may not be able to fully stop the bullying, but that they can improve the victim's situation. Accordingly, teachers' goal could be to improve the victim's situation rather than to completely stop the bullying.

6.4.3 Improve students' knowledge about bullying

In several anti-bullying interventions (e.g., KiVa, see Kärnä et al., 2011) students are stimulated to defend their victimized classmates. However, chapter 4 suggests that students do not always recognize victimized classmates. It seems plausible that students will not help classmates whom they do not consider to be bullied. Accordingly, I argue that anti-bullying programs should spend more attention on recognizing bullying. It should be explained that bullying is largely a subjective phenomenon and that it could be that not everyone in the classroom agrees on a students' victimization. Students should be made aware that what matters is not so much the actual victimization but the perceived victimization and that their help can improve the situation of the victim.

6.4.4 Change the classroom composition

This dissertation demonstrated that the classroom composition affects the bullying process. Chapter 2 demonstrated that there were less victimized students in multi-grade classrooms and chapter 4 demonstrated that students were less likely to perceive self-reported victims

as victimized in classrooms with more students. Teachers and schools may not be able to control all factors that cause bullying, but they may be able to affect the classroom composition. Even though more research is needed to replicate these findings, teachers and schools may experiment with the classroom composition and investigate whether this has an effect on the bullying.

6.5 Conclusion

In short, this dissertation provided more insight into the role that teachers and classmates play in stopping bullying. The results suggest that even though teachers have a central role in tackling bullying, they may not be fully prepared for this task. Moreover, the results suggest that victimized students were often not recognized by their teachers and classmates and that students who behaved as defenders were more likely to recognize victimized students. Furthermore, it was found that defending behavior was associated with friendship and dislike relationships. Finally, the results suggest that the classroom composition is associated with the recognition of victims and the prevalence of victimization. In short, the findings of this dissertation point out the need to consider teachers' and classmates' perceptions and behavior and the classroom composition in anti-bullying interventions.