The effects of general interpersonal and bullying-specific teacher behaviors on pupils’ bullying behaviors at school

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Abstract
Bullying is a problem in many schools around the world. It is seen as an unwanted phenomenon in education and in many contexts the reduction of bullying is a target of national and local education policy. In practice, the extent to which bullying occurs differs widely across classrooms. Part of these differences may be explained by teachers’ management of bullying. The goal of the present study was to combine two perspectives on teacher behavior to identify their impact on pupils’ bullying behavior at school, namely teachers’ bullying-specific and their general interpersonal behaviors. Data were collected by means of questionnaires from 33 upper-grade primary school teachers and their 784 pupils. Results of multilevel regression analyses showed that teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors independently contributed to pupils’ bullying behavior. Lower levels of bullying were established when teachers were less likely to discipline the bully, and showed more interpersonal behaviors with high levels of control and closeness, and less interpersonal behaviors with low levels of control and closeness. These findings suggest that teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors are two different pathways through which teachers can manage bullying. This underlines the need of taking teacher’s strengths into account in designing anti-bullying programs.

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Bullying is commonly defined as repeated negative actions by one or more peers toward another child who has difficulty defending him or herself (Olweus, 1993). In a recent study, Oldenburg and colleagues (2015) showed that 31.8% of the school-aged children are bullied at least twice a month. Various anti-bullying programs have been developed to reduce the prevalence of bullying in schools (Altomare, McCrimmon, & Beran, 2013). As teachers are the formal authority figures in the classroom, they are often attributed a central role in the management of bullying (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Several researchers point to the importance of whether and how teachers intervene in bullying incidents as an explanation for pupils’ bullying behavior (e.g. Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). However, besides this intervention approach, teachers can, with their more general interpersonal behaviors, contribute to a classroom climate in which positive social student behaviors are more or less likely (Allen, 2010). By showing positive interpersonal behaviors, teachers may to some extent prevent bullying to occur in their classroom. Although highly relevant, studies in which these intervention and prevention approaches are combined are scarce. Accordingly, in the present study we investigated the effects of teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors on pupils’ bullying behaviors.

Teachers’ responses to bullying incidents

When teachers are aware of bullying, they can respond in various ways. According to Bauman et al. (2008), teachers can: (1) ignore the incident; (2) discipline the bully; (3) work with the victim, for example by training his/her assertiveness; (4) enlist other adults, such as their colleagues or their pupils’ parents; and/or (5) work with the bully in a non-punitive way (e.g. finding something more interesting to do for the bully). Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) and Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2015) both demonstrated that teachers are most likely to punish the bully and least likely to encourage pupils to work it out on their own. Whether and how teachers respond to bullying incidents is very important because it appears to influence the likelihood of pupils’ future bullying behaviors (Heck, & Swenson, 2012).

With their interventions teachers communicate to their pupils which behaviors they consider appropriate and which unacceptable. When teachers actively intervene in bullying incidents, for example by eliciting concern for the victim, they promote the norm that bullying is not tolerated and will not be rewarded. Pupils may adjust to this norm through which it is less likely that they bully again (Bandura, 1977; Sam, 2011). On the other hand, if teachers do not intervene or
respond more passively to bullying incidents, they might reinforce the behavior and provide the signal that bullying is accepted which can result in higher levels of classroom bullying.

Indeed, Hektner and Swenson (2012) have demonstrated that pupils who experience less active intervention from their teacher report higher levels of victimization. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) and Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2015) have demonstrated that lower levels of peer victimization are reported in classes where teachers separate bullies and victims. Contrary, just advocating bullies and victims to avoid each other, without taking direct actions to reach separation, appeared to result in higher levels of peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). The literature is not consistent regarding the effects of punitive teacher behavior. Whereas Henry and colleagues (2000) demonstrated a decrease in pupils’ aggressive behaviors when their teacher and peers sanction and express disapproval of these behaviors, Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2015) demonstrated that reprimanding aggressive pupils yielded higher levels of aggression. Further research is needed to gain more insight in the effects of punishments on pupils’ bullying behavior. Together, the abovementioned studies suggest that teachers handle bullying in various ways which, in turn, influences pupils’ bullying behavior.

**Teachers’ general interpersonal behaviors**

Besides this intervention approach, teachers can also use a more preventive approach to manage bullying. They can, for example, model prosocial skills and set expectations for positive interactions between pupils with the general interpersonal behaviors they demonstrate in classroom interactions (Serdiouk, Rodkin, Madill, Logis, & Gest, 2015). In this way, teachers show their pupils in a more indirect way that bullying behaviors are not appreciated.

The circumplex Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior describes teachers’ interpersonal behaviors according to two dimensions (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006). First, an influence dimension refers to the level of control teachers have in their communication with pupils, ranging from submission (S) to dominance (D). Second, a proximity dimension indicates the level of closeness between teacher and pupils, ranging from opposition (O) to cooperation (C). As ratings along these two dimensions have been proven to be statistically independent, teacher behaviors can be described in terms of combinations of poles of both dimensions, for example, as being dominant and cooperative (DC) or dominant and opposing (DO). In this way, eight types of teacher behaviors can be generated: Leading (DC), helping (CD), understanding (CS), giving freedom (SC), uncertain (SO), dissatisfied (OS), admonishing (OD), and strict (DO).

With their interpersonal behaviors, teachers affect their pupils’ social behaviors in two ways (Wubbels et al., 2006). First, the behavior of the teacher can invite
pupils to respond in a symmetrical way. This means that pupils might model the behaviors of their teacher. For example, if teachers show proximity to their pupils, it is likely that pupils also show caring and respectful behaviors in interactions with their teacher and peers (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Richard, Schneider, and Mallet (2011) indeed found lower levels of bullying in classes where pupils perceived the relationship with their teacher as more positive. Second, pupils can complement the interpersonal behaviors of their teacher by showing behaviors that are opposite on the dimension of influence and identical on the proximity dimension (Wubbels et al., 2006). In this way, pupils from leading teachers are most likely to show docile behaviors (Thijs, Koomen, Roorda, & ten Hagen, 2011).

Previous studies have already demonstrated that pupils who perceive their teacher as supportive and sensitive to their needs show more prosocial behavior, less school misbehavior, are less likely to reject aggressive and withdrawn peers, and have more reciprocal friendships (Chang et al., 2007; Demanet & van Houtte, 2011; Gest & Rodkin, 2011). As teachers’ interpersonal behaviors affect pupils’ social behaviors and emotional development, they may also influence pupils’ bullying behaviors. In line with the principles of complementarity and symmetry, several researchers assumed that teachers who are in control and demonstrate care towards pupils may inhibit bullying by creating a sense of connectedness in the classroom in which pupils care about each other (Allen, 2010; Orpinas & Horne, 2006). On the school level, Gregory and colleagues (2010) indeed found that bullying and victimization occur less in high schools with an atmosphere characterized by discipline and caring adults. This suggests that not only bullying-specific teacher behaviors are relevant in explaining pupils’ bullying behavior, but that more general interpersonal teacher behaviors might also contribute to a classroom climate that affects the level of bullying.

The present study

In the present study we aimed to integrate insights from an intervention and prevention approach of bullying by investigating the extent to which teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors explain pupils’ bullying behavior. First, relations between teachers’ responses towards bullying incidents and their general interpersonal behaviors were investigated. Second, the effects of teacher behaviors on pupils’ individual as well as average classroom bullying behaviors were examined. We expected lower levels of bullying in classes where teachers take an active role in responding to bullying incidents and demonstrate interpersonal behaviors characterized by high levels of control and closeness. Contrary, more bullying was expected when teachers ignore bullying incidents and demonstrate behaviors with less interpersonal closeness. Whilst the literature was less clear about the effects of punishing the bully, we explored the relations between punishments and pupils’ bullying behavior.
Method

Sample and procedure

In this study, 33 teachers (18 men, 15 women) and their pupils ($n = 784$, 393 boys, 391 girls) from 19 elementary schools participated. Pupils were in the fourth to sixth grades and were aged between 8- and 13-years-old. The 19 schools were selected by means of a two-stage random sample method: Municipalities in the South-Eastern part of The Netherlands were randomly selected, from each of which one school was randomly selected. Schools that refused to participate were replaced by another randomly selected school from the same municipality. In The Netherlands, two-thirds of the elementary school teachers have part-time jobs (Inspection of Education, 2012). This is an important characteristic of the Dutch labor market, as part-time jobs are more common here (37.1% of all employment) than in other OECD countries (16.6%) (Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, & Leenders, 2013). Especially in sectors with many female employees, such as education (60% female), the number of part-time jobs is high. Because we assumed that teachers are most likely to influence pupils’ behavior when they frequently interact with each other, we decided to only recruit teachers who taught their class at least four days a week.

When school principals and teachers agreed to participate, a passive consent form was sent to the parents/guardians of the pupils in the respective classrooms. Four parents refused participation. Data were collected in February and March 2014 during a 45-minute classroom visit. The researcher started each classroom session with a short instruction in which the teacher and pupils also were guaranteed confidentiality. When the teacher and pupils completed the questionnaires they received a small gift.

Instruments

Questionnaires were administered to both teachers and students. Our following definition of bullying was included on the first page to make sure that everybody used the same definition when filling out the questionnaire: ‘We can speak of bullying when a child or a group of peers say malicious or hurtful things to another child. The same is true when a child is hit, kicked, threatened, or is excluded from the group. These things can be classified as bullying when they happen frequently or regularly, and when it is difficult for the child being bullied to defend himself or herself. It is NOT bullying when two or more children who are equally strong tease each other or fight with each other’.

Individual level of bullying and victimization. Bullying and victimization were assessed with the ‘bullying others’ and ‘victim of bullying’ subscales of the frequently used Dutch adaptation of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ; Olweus, 1989; Scholte, Sentse, & Granic, 2010). This measure has been shown to be reliable, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients above 0.70, and valid, given significant correlations
with relevant social and personal factors such as the number of friends, peer preference, self-esteem, and loneliness (Scholte et al., 2009). Both scales comprise five items, such as: ‘How often have you bullied others in the last 5 days?’ and ‘How often have you been bullied in the last 5 days?’ Responses could be given on a five-point scale ranging from never (score 1) to several times (score 5). We found Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.76 for the ‘victim of bullying’ scale and 0.61 for the ‘bullying others’ scale. To create scores on victimization and bullying for each pupil, the scores on the five items within each subscale were averaged.

**Classroom level of bullying and victimization.** The classroom level of victimization was assessed by averaging pupils’ individual victimization scores within each classroom. Bullying in the classroom was measured by asking pupils to rate on a visual analogue scale, ranging from 0 (‘never’) to 100 (‘very often’), how often bullying takes place in their class.

**Teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors.** The Handling Bullying Questionnaire (HBQ) was used to assess teachers’ responses to bullying (Bauman et al., 2008). On a five-point scale ranging from ‘I definitely would not’ (score 1) to ‘I definitely would’ (score 5) teachers could indicate for five behaviors (three to five items per behavior) how likely it was that they would act in that way in response to a scenario with elements of direct (verbal) and indirect bullying of moderate severity. Since the original questionnaire is in English, a translation into Dutch was made following a modified direct translation method (Behling & Law, 2000). A reliability analysis was conducted on the scores on the items from each scale. This resulted in relatively poor Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from 0.25–0.53. From each scale, items were removed to reach the highest reliability estimates. Removal of seven items resulted in acceptable reliability estimates, namely 0.61 for ‘ignore the incident’, 0.57 for ‘discipline the bully’, 0.45 for ‘work with the bully’, 0.70 for work ‘with the victim’, and 0.61 for ‘enlisting other adults’. These estimates are similar to those reported in the study of Bauman and colleagues (2008).

**Teachers’ interpersonal behaviors.** A Dutch version of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) was used to measure pupils’ perceptions of the interpersonal behaviors of their teacher (Wubbels et al., 2006). The QTI measures eight different types of teacher behaviors: Leadership (e.g. we all listen to this teacher), helpful (e.g. our teacher is willing to explain things again if we do not understand), understanding (e.g. our teacher knows when we do not understand), pupil freedom (e.g. our teacher allows us to choose what we want to work on), uncertain (e.g. this teacher allows us to tell him/her what to do), dissatisfied (e.g. our teacher is bad-tempered), admonishing (e.g. our teacher gets angry quickly), and strict (e.g. we have to be quiet in our teacher’s class). The version of the QTI used in this study consisted of 26 statements (i.e. three or four statements per scale) that pupils rated on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’ (score 1) to ‘always’ (score 5). Different versions of the QTI have been frequently used in many countries and the reliability has been proven to be
satisfactory (Wubbels et al., 2006). In our sample, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranged between 0.42–0.78. The intraclass correlations, indicating the amount of variance at the class level, varied between 0.20–0.57, which corresponds to values reported in previous studies (Telli, den Brok, & Cakiroglu, 2007).

**Statistical analysis**

First, to test whether teachers’ interpersonal behaviors relate to the strategies they use for handling bullying incidents, multilevel correlations were calculated. These correlations take the hierarchical structure of our data (pupils who are nested in classes) into account. To compute the correlations, two $z$ standardized variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) were included in a random intercepts model. In this way, the regression coefficient can be interpreted as the correlation coefficient (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Second, we investigated the effects of teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors on pupils’ individual as well as average classroom bullying behaviors and victimization experiences. Effects on the classroom level were investigated by performing linear regression analyses with the variables averaged within classrooms. Multilevel analyses were used to estimate the effects on the pupil level. First, an empty model (without predictors) was tested to estimate the variance between pupils within the classroom and the variance between classrooms. Second, to control for gender, grade, and class size, these variables were entered (as dummy variables) into the model. Third, a model with the control variables and teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors was tested (bullying-specific behavior model). Fourth, the effects of the control variables and teachers’ general interpersonal behaviors were tested (interpersonal behavior model). Finally, a model that included the control variables, teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors, and their general interpersonal behaviors was estimated. All independent variables were centered around their grand mean to facilitate interpretation.

We used SPSS statistics 19 and MLwiN 2.23 for the analyses (Rasbash, Steele, Browne, & Goldstein, 2012). In the multilevel models, the percentages of missing values for the main study variables were less than 1%. The models were estimated using listwise deletion of these cases and the Iterative Generalized Least Squares method. We performed Wald tests to test the significance of the predictors and likelihood ratio tests to determine which model best fitted the data. In all analyses, the significance level was set at 5%.

**Results**

**Bullying and victimization**

The means and standard deviations for pupils’ involvement in bullying and their victimization experiences are described in Table 1 provided in Supplemental Material retrievable from the Journal website. When comparing the means of
Boys' and girls' involvement in bullying, 1.31 (SD = 0.38) and 1.21 (SD = 0.32), respectively, a significant difference was found, $t(770) = 3.98, p < 0.01$. Boys reported to be more involvement in bullying than girls. Boys and girls did not significantly differ with respect to their victimization experiences. Involvement in bullying was positively related to victimization experiences for both boys ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$) and girls ($r = 0.24, p < 0.01$), indicating that some children were both bully and victim.

**Teacher behaviors**

Table 2, Supplemental Material, demonstrates the means and standard deviations for teachers' bullying specific and general interpersonal behaviors. On a scale ranging from never (1) to always (5), teachers were most likely to be perceived by their pupils as helpful ($M = 4.37$) and least likely as admonishing ($M = 1.72$). When faced with bullying incidents, teachers reported that it was least likely that they would ignore them ($M = 1.48$) and that it was most likely that they would discipline the bully ($M = 4.24$).

**Relations between teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors**

Multilevel correlations were calculated to test whether teachers’ general interpersonal behaviors related to the strategies they would use for handling bullying incidents. Correlations ranged from $-0.01$ to $0.14$, which were all non-significant. This indicates that teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors are distinct teacher behaviors which can independently contribute to pupils’ bullying behaviors.

**Classroom level of bullying and victimization**

We performed linear regression analyses to examine the extent to which the average level of classroom bullying and victimization can be explained by teachers' bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors. The level of classroom bullying was significantly explained by teachers' bullying-specific behaviors, namely by $34.0\%$ ($F(5,27) = 2.78, p = 0.04$). The level of bullying was higher in classrooms where teachers were more likely to discipline the bully (Table 3, Supplemental Material). Teachers' responses to bullying incidents also significantly explained $42.6\%$ of the variance of the classroom's level of victimization ($F(5,27) = 4.01, p < 0.01$). The more likely teachers were to enlist other adults and the less likely they were to discipline the bully, the less peer victimization occurred in their classroom (Table 3, Supplemental Material). Teachers' general interpersonal behaviors did not have any statistically significant effects on the classroom levels of bullying and victimization. Also, the joint contribution of teachers' bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors did not explain significantly more of the variance.
of the outcome variables compared to the unique contributions of teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors.

**Pupil level of bullying and victimization**

**Bullying behaviors.** The test of an empty model revealed that pupils’ involvement in bullying significantly differed across classrooms, $\chi^2 (1) = 20.91$, $p < 0.01$. From the empty model, an ICC of 0.070 existed ($0.009/[0.009 + 0.0119] = 0.070$) indicating that 7.03% of the variance in pupils’ bullying behavior was attributable to classroom effects (Table 4, Supplemental Material). Next, the control variables were entered into the model. They explained 2.52% of the between-pupil variance ($[0.119–0.116]/0.119 = 0.025$). Then, the bullying-specific teacher behavior model was tested. Although the five types of teachers’ responses to bullying incidents explained 33.33% of the initial between-classroom variance, a chi-square test, however, revealed that this model did not significantly fit the data better than the model with only the control variables, $\chi^2 (5) = 7.18$, $p = 0.30$.

Thereafter, the model with the eight pupil perceived general interpersonal teacher behaviors as predictors of pupils’ bullying behavior was tested. They explained 22.22% of the between-class and 10.93% of the between-pupil variance. A significant drop in deviance was observed, indicating that the interpersonal teacher behavior model fitted the data better ($\chi^2 (8) = 96.21$, $p < 0.01$). The regression coefficients showed that pupils who perceived their teacher as more helpful ($p = 0.02$), less uncertain ($p < 0.01$), and/or less dissatisfied ($p < 0.01$), were less likely to bully (Table 4, Supplemental Material). Last, a model with both teachers’ bullying-specific and interpersonal behaviors was tested. This model did not fit the data better than the model which included only teachers’ interpersonal behaviors, $\chi^2 (5) = 8.70$, $p = 0.12$.

**Victimization experiences.** The empty model showed that 4.83% of the variance in pupils’ victimization experiences could be attributed to differences between classrooms, $\chi^2 (1) = 10.33$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 5, Supplemental Material). A test of the model with the control variables revealed that 52.63% of the between-class variance and 2.41% of the between-pupil variance was explained by the control variables. Adding teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors to the model showed that an additional 14.04% of between-class variance was explained. However, a chi-square test revealed that this model did not fit the data better than the model with only the control variables, $\chi^2 (5) = 8.37$, $p = 0.14$.

Then, the model with teachers’ general interpersonal behaviors was tested. Compared with the model that included only the control variables, this model fitted the data better, $\chi^2 (8) = 83.91$, $p < 0.01$. Interpersonal teacher behaviors accounted for 10.69% of the variance between pupils. The model showed that pupils experienced less victimization when they perceived their teacher as more leading ($p < 0.01$), more helpful ($p < 0.01$), and less uncertain ($p < 0.01$) (Table 5, Supplemental Material). As was the case for pupils’ bullying behavior, a model
which included both teachers' bullying-specific and interpersonal behaviors was not better able to predict pupils' victimization experiences than the interpersonal teacher behavior model, $\chi^2 (5) = 7.67, p = 0.12$.

**Discussion**

The present study expands the literature on the impact of teachers on classroom bullying by including a combination of bullying-specific and general interpersonal teacher behaviors to explain pupils' bullying behaviors. Consistent with previous research, our study revealed that teachers play a significant role in the management of bullying in schools (e.g. Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). Our findings showed that teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors were different pathways that both led to lower levels of bullying and victimization. On the one hand, with their general interpersonal behaviors teachers can create a classroom atmosphere which prevents pupils from bullying. On the other hand, with their bullying-specific behaviors teachers can intervene in bullying incidents which makes pupils less likely to bully again. Specifically, pupils bullied less and felt less victimized when teachers were less likely to punish the bully, more likely to display interpersonal behaviors with high levels of control and closeness, and less likely to show behaviors with less control and closeness. In addition, lower levels of victimization were also established when teachers enlist other adults to handle bullying.

In line with our expectations, we found lower levels of bullying in classes where teachers show interpersonal behaviors with high levels of control and closeness, whereas higher levels of bullying were found when teachers show less interpersonal control and closeness. In the present study, we assessed pupils’ perceptions of their teacher’s interpersonal behaviors. This allowed us to take individual differences in these perceptions into account and to aggregate the perceptions of pupils within the same class to get insight in teacher’s average interpersonal relationship with the entire class. As in previous research, our study revealed that pupils in the same classroom have rather different perceptions of their teacher’s interpersonal behaviors (e.g. den Brok, Bergen, Stahl, & Brekelmans, 2004). These differences might arise because teacher’s interpersonal behaviors can take different forms among pupils and/or can be interpreted differently by pupils (den Brok, van Tartwijk, Wubbels, & Veldman, 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). We found that pupils’ individual perceptions of their teacher’s interpersonal behaviors were better able to predict pupils’ behavior than teachers’ average interpersonal behaviors in the classroom. This suggests that teacher’s interpersonal behavior is not a fixed teacher characteristic but instead, pupils construct their own views of this behavior upon which they react (den Brok et al., 2004).

Besides the effects of teachers’ general interpersonal behaviors, we found lower levels of victimization when teachers were more likely to enlist other adults. We also explored the relations between disciplining the bully and pupils’ bullying behavior. Just like the findings of Troop-Gordon and Ladd
(2015), we found higher levels of classroom bullying and victimization when teachers were more likely to discipline the bully. A possible reason for this effect might be that punishments enforce bullies to stop immediately, but results in higher levels of bullying on the long term through side-effects, such as revenge seeking (O’Donell, Reeve, & Smith, 2012). Thus, although our findings showed that active intervention in bullying incidents is beneficial, punishing the bully seems to be an exception.

In the present study, we used the Handing Bullying Questionnaire, that has been validated in prior research (Bauman et al., 2008). With this measure teachers are invited to indicate how likely they would be to use several strategies to intervene in a given scenario. This method might suffer from some validity problems. First, as is the case for general interpersonal behaviors, pupils within the same classroom might perceive the bullying-specific teacher behaviors differently, or teachers might respond to different bullies in a different way. It would be interesting for future research to include a pupil measure for bullying-specific teacher behavior as predictor of pupil behavior. Second, the use of a standardized hypothetical scenario might limit the ecological validity of study findings. As a scenario delineates the same contextual framework to all teachers, it is an appropriate way to compare teachers’ responses (Poulou, 2001). However, it does not take all environmental and personal factors into account that may influence decisions in real life. In the interpretation of our findings we should keep in mind that they are based upon teachers’ intentions. For future research, we recommend to assess teachers’ bullying-specific behaviors in a more ecologically valid way, for example by asking teachers to describe how they responded to previous bullying incidents or by observing teachers’ responses to bullying in the classroom.

Our results have important implications for teachers’ behaviors in the classroom and the anti-bullying approaches of schools. Teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors seem to be different pathways through which teachers can influence pupils’ bullying behavior. On the one hand, teachers can prevent bullying by creating a classroom atmosphere in which pupils are less likely to bully. On the other hand, teachers can adequately intervene in bullying incidents which discourages pupils from bullying. This emphasis on both prevention and intervention efforts to manage bullying is also reflected in current anti-bullying programs (Kärnä et al., 2011). School psychologists can play a central role in the management of bullying. They may provide in-service training to teachers and give support with coaching and supervision programs. We advise school psychologists to focus in their support on the two ways in which teachers can contribute to lower levels of bullying in the classroom. First, they can help teachers to prevent children from bullying by improving their interpersonal skills. They can, for example, provide training to teachers to improve their relationship skills and their classroom management strategies (Orpinas, Horne, & Multisite Violence Prevention Program, 2004). After the training, continuous coaching is recommended (Reinke, Stormont, Webster-Stratton, Newcomer, & Herman, 2012). By encouraging teachers to reflect on their own behaviors, school psychologists can help teachers to
fine tune their skills and to maintain changes in their interpersonal behaviors over time (den Brok, Brekelmans, Levy, & Wubbels, 2002; Reinke et al., 2012).

Second, school psychologists can support teachers in developing effective strategies to intervene when bullying has occurred. They may provide training in responding to bullying, for example by discussing case-studies or with personal coaching in role-play simulations of bullying situations (Anderson, 2011; Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). In this way, school psychologists can improve teachers’ knowledge about bullying interventions and empower their skills to intervene. Because this study has shown unique contributions of both intervention and prevention behaviors, a third, and probably the most effective, way of supporting teachers is using a combination of promoting both teachers’ prevention and intervention skills. In previous research, this combination is seen as helpful and preferred by pupils (Crothers, Kolbert, & Barker, 2006).

The finding that teachers’ bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors are two mechanisms that work independently of each other implies that teachers can compensate for an unfavorable interpersonal style by responding adequately to bullying incidents. This gives school psychologists the opportunity to take teacher qualities into account and to provide them with individual counseling adapted to individual teacher’s strengths and weaknesses. For teachers who, for example, find it difficult to show interpersonal behaviors with high levels of closeness and control, school psychologists can help them to become better equipped to enlist parents and colleagues to handle bullying. By first deriving an understanding of a teacher’s interpersonal style and the strategies he/she uses to handle bullying (for example by classroom observations and/or pupil questionnaires), school psychologists can further adapt their training and support services to address teachers’ individual needs. In this way, an anti-bullying approach can be designed that best fits a teacher’s strengths. This corresponds to the current understanding that anti-bullying programs should be adjusted to the school or classroom context to become effective (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009).

In sum, teachers play a major role in the management of bullying in schools. They might benefit from feedback on the effects of their bullying-specific and general interpersonal behaviors on pupils’ bullying behaviors. School psychologists can provide teachers with this feedback. They can use the instruments that are available for the assessment of interpersonal behaviors and bullying interventions as diagnostic and as a basis for further teacher support. Then, they can match their support services to the needs of individual teachers to help them to prevent and manage bullying as effectively as possible.

References


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Ron HJ Scholte received his PhD in psychology at the University of Nijmegen. He studies child and adolescent development, and the way social relationships with parents and peers affect this development. He is especially interested in both the bright sides (friendships) and dark sides (e.g. bullying and rejection) of peer relations. In his studies he applies longitudinal survey research, experiments, as well as gene-environment designs.