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Brief report

Relations between harsh discipline from teachers, perceived teacher support, and bullying victimization among high school students



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ABSTRACT

This study examined how the experience of harsh discipline from teachers is related to students' experience of bullying victimization in a Philippine high school. Respondents were 401 first- to fourth-year high school students of an urban public school in the Philippines. Using structural equation modeling, a hypothesized model with direct associations between harsh discipline and bullying victimization, and an indirect path via students' perception of teacher support, was tested. The data adequately fit the model and showed that experiences of harsh teacher discipline predicted higher bullying victimization and students' negative perception of teacher support. There were no significant indirect effects. The findings suggest that school discipline strategies may have repercussions on students' behaviors and relationships, highlighting the teacher's role in modeling and setting norms for acceptable behaviors. Future studies can examine further how teachers' harsh or positive discipline behaviors relate to bullying.

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Bullying is a major concern in schools worldwide. It refers to aggressive behavior or intentional “harmdoing” carried out repeatedly and over time, within an unequal power relationship, and may be physical, verbal, and social in form (Olweus, 1997). Among Asia Pacific countries, the Philippines had the highest rate of bullying, with 16% of students reporting different types of harassment by bullies (Lai, Ye, & Chang, 2008). The current study presents preliminary data from a bullying intervention program in a Philippine high school and examines how the experience of harsh discipline from teachers is related to students' experience of bullying. In general, teachers' classroom management, discipline styles, and relationships with students are associated with students' developmental outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers' behaviors may be especially influential in the Philippine context, where deference to and approval from authority figures are highly valued (Gorospe, 1988).

Teachers' behaviors and interactions with students are considered critical because they influence the social dynamics in the classroom (Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011). Studies have examined how poor teacher–student relations affect victimization (Di Stasio, Savage, & Burgos, 2016) and how teachers' responses to bullying are affected by their gender and experience (Yoon & Bauman, 2014; Yoon, Bauman, Choi, & Hutchinson, 2011).

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Discipline is a significant aspect of teacher-student interaction. In the Philippines, physical and humiliating punishment is explicitly prohibited in schools. Nonetheless, students report being pinched, cursed, ridiculed, or had things thrown at them (UNICEF, 2009). Harsh discipline, or punitive, coercive, and hostile behaviors by teachers can create a school environment where bullying is likely to occur (Allen, 2010). Khoury-Kassabri (2011) found that higher levels of physical and emotional victimization by teachers at the class-level increase the chances of students' victimization by their peers. Through harsh discipline, teachers model the use of aggressive and intimidating behavior towards students, and influence environmental norms and cognitions regarding its acceptability, following the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989).

Harsh discipline also negates a supportive teacher-student relationship. Perceptions of poor support from teachers may have negative implications for bullying and victimization. Furlong, Chung, Bates, and Morrison (1995) found that victims of school violence are twice as likely to report no teacher connections, while non-victims report having teachers to talk to about problems. When teachers are perceived to be supportive, they may be more aware of victimization either from students' openness or due to their sensitivity to students' needs. This awareness may lead to intervention and assistance to stop victimization (Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2010). The lack of positive relations with teachers possibly reduces social control mechanisms that could inhibit bullying.

When using harsh discipline, teachers act as models of aggressive behaviors, demonstrate acceptability and benefits of aggression, and create a non-supportive relationship with students, thereby increasing the likelihood of bullying victimization in school. Hence we tested a structural model positing a direct association between harsh discipline and bullying victimization, and an indirect path via students' perception of teacher support.

Method

Participants

Participants were 401 high school students (48.1% female) between 11 and 20 years old ($M = 14.36$, $SD = 1.57$) in a public school in Metropolitan Manila, Philippines. We used a stratified random sampling design to obtain an equal number of students across four year levels.

Measures

Harsh teacher discipline

Students' experience of harsh discipline from teachers was measured using an 11-item self-report measure, and included physical and verbal punishment, coercion, and intimidation (e.g. "slapping, spanking, hitting with hand or object"; "cursing, insulting, shaming"). Students reported their experience in the last six months (0 = no, 1 = yes). The sum was the manifest variable for the factor Harsh Teacher Discipline (HTD). As is the case for single-item factors, the residual term was fixed to 0 and the factor loading fixed to 1 in the final SEM model.

Bullying victimization

Bullying victimization refers to the frequency of students' experience of repeated aggressive behavior (1 = never, 5 = several times a week) committed by another student of a stronger position or stature in the past six months. A Principal Component Analysis of the 11-item scale (oblique rotation) revealed 3 factors with eigenvalues above 1.0; items reflecting sexual and cyberbullying loaded on the first factor (32% of variance); items reflecting physical bullying, harassment (e.g. forcing to do something), and damaging possessions loaded on the second factor (11% of variance); items reflecting verbal bullying and maligning loaded on the third factor (9% of variance). Items corresponding to these factors were combined to form three manifest variable parcels for the latent factor of Bullying Victimization in the final SEM model.

Perceived teacher support

An 8-item subscale of perceived teacher support measured the degree to which students feel their teachers are accepting, respectful, helpful, and trustworthy. The subscale was taken and revised from a larger School Climate survey developed by the third author for a previous study (Alampay & Macapagal, 2011). Students rated their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to statements such as "My teachers respect my feelings and thoughts" and "I have teachers I can trust and rely on when I have a problem." Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of teacher support. Internal consistency for this scale is Cronbach's α .674; $M = 4.191$, $SD = 0.505$. Items represented the eight manifest variables for the latent factor of Teacher Support in the final SEM model.

Procedures

The researchers and trained undergraduate Psychology students administered the survey to randomly selected high school students from each year level, in the library or classroom. All measures were in Filipino and were responded to anonymously. Students provided informed consent and were free to withdraw or not answer any part of the survey that they did not want to answer.

Results

Table 1 shows that up to 33% of the sample had experienced some form of harsh teacher discipline in the previous 6 months. For bullying victimization, 19% and 11% reported experiencing verbal and social bullying, respectively, at least once a week in the previous 6 months. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables.

Fig. 1 presents the structural model of the relations between Harsh Teacher Discipline, Teacher Support, and Bullying Victimization, tested via Maximum Likelihood estimation using EQS 6.3 (Bentler, 2006). Given significant multivariate kurtosis (normalized est = 40.175), Robust statistics were considered. The results indicate a well-fitting model: Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2(52) = 78.897, p < .01, NNFI = 0.912, CFI = 0.931, RMSEA = 0.037$ (90% C.I. .018–.052). There was a positive association between HTD and Bullying Victimization, and a negative association between HTD and Teacher Support. There were no significant indirect effects. Standardized path coefficients are indicated in Fig. 1. Factor loadings of variables on their latent factors are in Table 3.

Discussion

Teachers are important in the school ecology. They act as role models and are thus crucial in adolescent identity development. The findings of this study suggest that teachers' behaviors are associated with students' experiences with peers (Hong & Espelage, 2012). The moderate association between harsh discipline and bullying victimization implies that students who experience harsh discipline from teachers are also vulnerable to being bullied by peers. In using harsh discipline, teachers model aggressive behaviors as acceptable ways to interact with others and possibly communicate the message that students are not worthy of better treatment (James et al., 2008).

Table 1
Frequencies of responses for experience of harsh teacher discipline and bullying victimization.

Harsh Teacher Discipline	Percent of "yes" responses	Bullying Victimization	Percent experiencing 1×/week or more often
pinching body parts, pulling hair	33.4	called bad and hurtful names, mocked, teased	19.0
cursing, insulting, shaming	27.9	intentionally left behind, ignored, excluded	11.0
slapping, spanking, hitting with hand or object	26.4	took or destroyed your things	10.4
threatening to hurt you or someone close to you	25.4	forced to do things you don't want to do	8.7
confiscating your things without returning them	22.2	being lied about, subject of gossip	7.9
withholding your needs as punishment (e.g. food)	15.2	took your money	7.4
punching, beating, strangling	13.2	called you sexual names, sexual/rude teasing, gestures	6.5
asking you to carry heavy loads as punishment	7.2	physically hurt, beat, kicked, locked	5.4
locking you in a room, tying to a chair or other object	6.5	sent you bad, hurtful, rude messages on the Internet	4.4
asking you to kneel on floor or on stones, beans, salt	4.7	sent you bad, hurtful, rude cellphone messages	4.2
forcing you to swallow or drink disgusting or dangerous substances	2.0	forcibly touched you, kissed, or other sexual acts	2.7

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and Pearson r correlations of variables.

	M (SD)	HTD	BP1	BP2	BP3	TS1	TS2	TS3	TS4	TS5	TS6	TS7	TS8
Harsh Teacher Discipline Sum (HTD)	1.843 (2.063)	1											
Bullying Parcel 1 (BP1)	1.317 (.574)	.223**	1										
Bullying Parcel 2 (BP2)	1.567 (.654)	.296**	.486**	1									
Bullying Parcel 3 (BP3)	1.899 (.936)	.155**	.328**	.381**	1								
TS1- feel accepted by my teachers	4.148 (.886)	-.154**	-.028	-.080	-.106*	1							
TS2- teachers and students listen to each other	4.007 (.918)	-.055	-.072	-.018	-.060	.240**	1						
TS3- teachers make environment safe	4.555 (.846)	-.044	.024	-.022	-.030	.225**	.185**	1					
TS4- don't get along with teachers (R)	4.130 (.975)	-.208**	-.091	-.066	-.172**	.281**	.257**	.152**	1				
TS5- teachers respect feelings and thoughts	4.012 (.987)	-.054	-.018	-.078	-.072	.122*	.226**	.181**	.102*	1			
TS6- I can ask for help	4.037 (.993)	-.061	-.117*	.009	.023	.140**	.225**	.196**	.109*	.283**	1		
TS7- teachers are kind and competent	4.431 (.866)	-.157**	-.040	.008	-.020	.235**	.181**	.119*	.130**	.185**	.173**	1	
TS8- have teachers I can trust and rely on	4.210 (.888)	-.092	.016	.041	.061	.236**	.226**	.210**	.121*	.366**	.304**	.261**	1

Note: Highest possible score for HTD is 11; for BP1-BP3 is 5; for TS1-TS6 is 5.

*Correlation significant at $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

**Correlation significant at $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

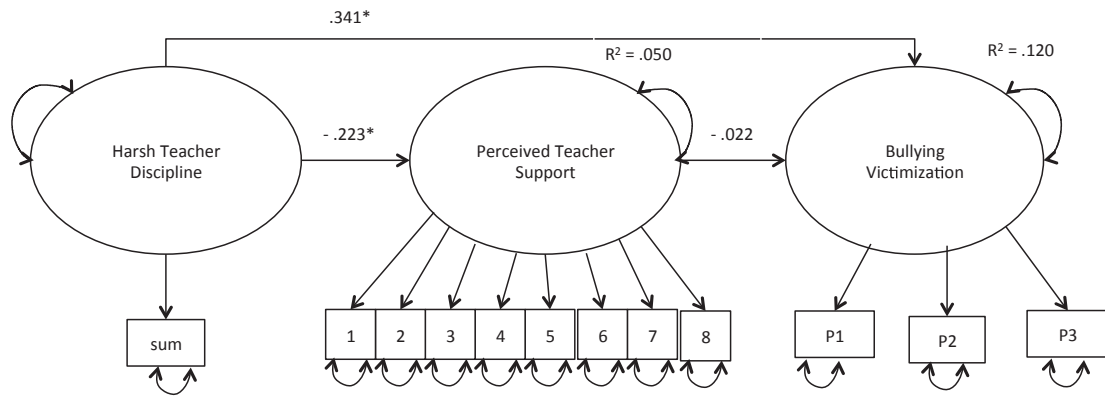


Fig. 1. Structural model of relations between Harsh Teacher Discipline, Perceived Teacher Support, and Bullying Victimization.

Table 3

Standardized factor loadings of variables on their respective latent factors.

Latent Factor	Variable	B	R ²
Teacher Support	TS1	.447	.200
	TS2	.472	.223
	TS3	.383	.147
	TS4	.363	.132
	TS5	.490	.240
	TS6	.493	.243
	TS7	.412	.170
	TS8	.579	.335
Bullying Victimization	BP1	.632	.399
	BP2	.813	.662
	BP3	.485	.236

All significant ($p < .05$).

Supportive relationships are important for a positive school climate (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). Harsh discipline contributes to the perception that important authority figures are unsupportive. However, contrary to our hypothesis, students' perception of teacher support did not mediate the relation between experience of harsh discipline and bullying victimization. Relationship with teachers is only one aspect of the school climate. Other aspects of the school climate such as belongingness and support from other students may be more salient in adolescence and must be examined.

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design. Despite significant associations, harsh teacher discipline is not presumed to be the cause of bullying victimization or of school climate. Longitudinal or intervention research is necessary to provide stronger evidence of the directional relations inferred here. The use of adolescent self-reports is helpful in revealing covert forms of bullying, but the single source of data can inflate relations due to shared-method variance. Longitudinal data, multiple sources, and intervention studies are warranted in studying a complex issue such as bullying.

Nonetheless, the study highlights the importance of discipline used in schools and the need to further examine teachers' impact on students and the school ecology. Teachers in public high schools in the Philippines handle large groups of adolescents in small classrooms with limited administrative support. These conditions exacerbate teacher stress and punitiveness that affect student behaviors and the school climate. Hence, educators need to develop competencies in the use of effective discipline strategies to manage classes and deal with difficult behaviors (Allen, 2010; James et al., 2008). Future studies can examine further how teachers' harsh or positive discipline behaviors relate to bullying.

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