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**“Teachers See Nothing”: Exploring Students’ and Teachers’ Perspectives on School  
Bullying with a New Arts-Based Methodology**

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## **“Teachers See Nothing”: Exploring Students’ and Teachers’ Perspectives on School Bullying with a New Arts-Based Methodology**

### **Abstract**

Even though bullying is a perennial problem, there are still significant gaps in the research. The sensitive nature of the issue prompted us to develop and test a new arts-based method – a set of incomplete, problem-focused comic strips that were given to the participants for creative completion and were subsequently used as individualized interview prompts. The study took place in Russia with 14 teachers and 39 school children. The findings indicated that students and teachers agreed that bullying instances should not be reported, but rather ought to be handled by victimized students themselves. However, there is a significant difference in how bullying is perceived by teachers and students. The majority of teachers indicated either seeing no bullying or only seeing bullying rarely as a justifiable reaction to provocation. Students, nonetheless, reported witnessing/experiencing bullying situations regularly.

**Key words:** school bullying, arts-based research, graphic vignettes, teacher beliefs, student beliefs, peer aggression, Russian education

## **Introduction**

Undeniably, bullying is a global problem ‘found in most cultures of the world and across all ethnic and socioeconomic lines’ (Bauman & Hurley, 2005, p. 50). However, international research shows that the nature and scale of the problem differs from context to context – comparative studies involving dozens of countries found that the number of preadolescents and adolescents experiencing bullying ranged from 5-6% among female students in Sweden to 40-45% among male students in Lithuania (Due et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2009). Such differences can be attributed to a number of important factors and studying them can provide valuable insights into peer aggression.

But not all countries are equally concerned with bullying. Russia is one of the places that has failed to make it on the list of countries actively addressing the issue (Berger, 2007). This uninterest has resulted in a chronic lack of relevant research and preventive work (Glasman, 2009; HBSC, 2013/2014). This can largely be explained by the fact that in Russia ‘for a long time it was socially unacceptable to talk about school bullying. It was as if the problem had never existed’ (Mertsalova, 2000, p. 25). Today, however, newly emerging Russian initiatives and research can provide a wider reach and valuable insights benefiting international anti-bullying efforts.

It has been agreed internationally that bullying has three main components – it is (1) intentional, (2) repeated aggressive behavior directed towards an individual (3) of lower power or perceived social status (Smith et al., 1999; AERA, 2013). The general public, however, remains far from reaching a shared understanding, which has important implications for scholarly work and interventions. Reported levels and overall perception of bullying significantly depend on the meaning and underlying connotations that the term ‘bullying’ has in the native language of the study participants (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefhoghe, 2002). Russian teachers and students, for

instance, understand bullying predominantly as physical aggression rather than social exclusion, name-calling or hazing (Bochaver et al., 2015a). Moreover, not only culture but also personal experiences can influence how people understand bullying. For example, international research suggests that bullies often see their actions as a justified response to provocations which makes their reports very different from non-bullying peers (Ireland & Ireland, 2003; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005).

Thus, appropriate research methodologies need to be further developed in order to account for the influences that people's cultural backgrounds and personal experiences have on bullying-related perceptions. For example, Smith et al. (2002) conducted a fourteen-country international comparative study and responded to the differences in perception by various individuals by abstaining from using the word bullying, instead inviting participants to respond to stick-figure cartoons that do not suggest any particular culture or ethnic group. Similarly, our study aimed to overcome the problem of potential contextual and personal biases with the use of a new arts-based methodology. 'Arts-based research is often particularly useful for investigating topics associated with high levels of emotion' (Kara, 2015, p. 24) as it enables researchers to explore people's feelings and views while minimizing possible traumatic impact on them.

Moreover, social scientists and psychologists examine bullying mostly through the lens of quantitative methods which sometimes show a certain degree of insufficiency (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006; Bochaver et al., 2015a). Participants in Russia, both teachers and students, are reported to choose socially desirable answers when they are administered questionnaires (Puzanova & Tertyshnikova, 2015). This hinders researchers and educators from seeing the real picture. When a sensitive research topic such as bullying is explored, the use of qualitative methodology is reported to be 'a more accurate representation of teachers'

responses since the data is purely based on their personal experiences, definitions and perceptions of bullying' (Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, & Skoczylas, 2009).

Furthermore, this study compared the views of students and teachers on bullying. Directly or indirectly involved in bullying situations either as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders, adolescents perceive bullying oftentimes in a drastically different way compared to how their teachers do (Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002; Holt & Keyes, 2004; Marshall et al., 2009). Unlike students, 'teachers report lower prevalence rates of bullying' (Holt & Keyes, 2004, p. 122), meaning that teachers might not have sufficient knowledge and skills necessary to identify patterns of bullying behavior among school students. As a consequence, 'students lose confidence in the ability of their teachers to solve this problem' (Cunningham, Cunningham, Ratcliffe, & Vaillancourt, 2010, p. 322).

Research consistently shows that teachers try to reduce bullying in schools through school-based intervention and prevention programs (Rigby, 2004; Shalaginova, 2012; Bochaver, Zhilinskaya, & Khlomov, 2015b), but they yield modest results. Although such programs do involve multiple stakeholders, to date, there is scarce research on perceptual differences among parents, teachers, school administration, and students with regard to bullying situations at school. The present study examines the perceptual differences between students and teachers with regards to experiencing/witnessing bullying. While the majority of bullying research relies solely on students' viewpoints, the current study integrates teacher perspectives, as well as school contextual factors, in order to get a more comprehensive view of school bullying among adolescents. Further, the role that teachers in Russian schools play in either escalating or eliminating bullying is not studied enough (Bochaver et al., 2015b).

The main research question addressed in this study is how the perceptions of bullying differ among students and teachers. So far we have conducted two pilot studies with the use of qualitative arts-based research methodology (referred to as graphic vignettes) examining

how students and their teachers perceive bullying in Russian schools. This is the second part in a series of articles written as a result of piloting the new methodology. We presented the findings from our pilot studies at the World Anti-Bullying Forum 2019 and the Conferences of the British Education Research Association in 2018 and 2019.

## **Literature review**

### *Theoretical framework*

This study is informed by several influential theoretical frameworks. The first of them, the social dominance theory, was proposed by Pellegrini and colleagues (Pellegrini, 1995; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). It posits that bullying is used as a medium to achieve a better social status. According to this theory bullies strategically seek to establish influence and elicit submission, which is often achieved through a combination of being friendly and nice mixed with coercive strategies (Hawley, 2003). In support of this theory, Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin (2006) write that hierarchical structures are ‘shaped by legitimising myths’ – meaning that oppressors perpetuate and take advantage of existing ideologies (beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes) in order to gain and maintain a superior status. These legitimising myths ‘often lead subordinates to collaborate with dominants in the maintenance of oppression’ and if necessary any characteristic of a person (class, race, ethnic origins, gender, etc.) can be linked to a legitimising myth and instrumentalised against that person (Pratto et al., 2006, p. 76). Research on bullying shows that victims are often seen as different from the majority, which exposes them to situations in which their social status is questioned (Sweeting & West, 2001; Horowitz et al., 2004).

According to another theoretical framework, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), children transition during middle school from concrete operational to formal operational thought. At this developmental stage children are likely to be egocentric and have difficulty understanding other people’s perspectives. Because research shows that

being insensitive and lacking in empathy positively correlates with bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015; Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2016), we might expect more during the middle school years. Thus, from the perspective of the theory of cognitive development, bullying might be viewed as an inevitable phase that needs to be lived through. An understanding of school bullying as a natural element of child development has been prevalent in Russia for a long time (Bochaver et al., 2015a).

In support of the social dominance theory as well as the developmental view Rigby (2004, p. 291) highlights that children bully and intimidate as a way to establish their power and influence, but as they develop and learn how to assert their dominance in other ways, they become less likely to engage in bullying (Hawley, 1999; Rigby, 2004). But, Rigby (2004) warns against seeing bullying as a ‘natural’ part of growing up and suggests we focus on other factors of the environment that might be inadvertently promoting higher levels of bullying. Even though bullying peaks in middle school and then declines (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002), it is not uncommon for bullying to persist in adulthood at the workplace, which indicates that people do not simply ‘outgrow’ bullying (Kowalski, Toth, & Morgan, 2017). Moreover, the decline in bullying over time can be attributed at least in part to the victims gradually acquiring relevant coping skills (such as ignoring and counterattacking) (Smith et al., 2001). Finally, it might not be possible to eliminate bullying among children, but it can be effectively reduced (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010; Kärnä et al., 2011).

A third theory, the social ecological theory, takes the context into account – it conceptualizes human development as a highly complex process of interaction between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to this theoretical framework, bullying does not occur in isolation involving, only bullies and victims. Rather, it

takes place within a larger social context involving the interplay of numerous factors related to bystanding peers, educators, families, and communities (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Espelage & Swearer, 2003, 2009, 2010; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). ‘A comprehensive framework therefore, becomes essential to investigate the various elements influencing bullying’ (Mishna et al., 2005, p. 719). Salmivalli and her colleagues argue that bullying needs to be viewed as a group phenomenon – bystanders play an important role, often rewarding perpetrators with social acceptance and status promotion (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Salmivalli, 2014). Other contextual factors, including the influence of teachers, have been also gaining more attention.

### *The role of teachers*

Supportive adults are an important factor that contributes to positive school climate, a condition that lowers bullying incidents (Baek, Andreescu, & Rolfe, 2017). Teachers are often ‘key players in recognizing bullying incidents and intervening’ (Dedousis-Wallace, & Shute, 2009, p. 3). However, the literature indicates teachers don’t always counter bullying effectively, because teachers often underestimate the scale of bullying, purposefully ignore it or are completely unaware of it (Olweus, 1991; 1993; Houndoumadi, & Pataeraki, 2001; Mishna et al., 2005). Not seeing the whole picture can be explained by a few reasons. Teachers in the focus group discussions conducted by Cunningham et al. (2015, p. 466) stressed that ‘bullying is becoming more difficult to detect, complex, and challenging for educators to deal with’. This relates to the fact that targeted students often avoid reporting bullying incidents and seeking help out of fear of possible retaliation and further escalation (Unnever, & Cornell, 2003; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Wiseman & Jones, 2018).

In addition, inability to detect bullying could be coming from its normalization. Indeed, despite its seriousness, it is not uncommon to see that bullying is normalized among teachers (Crothers, Kolbert, & Barker, 2006). Indeed, studies demonstrated that the degree to which

teachers perceive bullying as a serious problem determines the likelihood of them identifying and intervening in bullying situations or anticipating and preventing them (Craig et al., 2000; Ellis & Shute, 2007; O'Brennan, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2017). Yoon, Sulkowski, & Bauman (2016) also argue that 'teachers' own beliefs, attitudes and experiences are likely to affect their evaluation of bullying situations and thus their responses' (p. 93).

When teachers fail to take any actions against bullying, they unwittingly contribute to increased levels of bullying, which can lead to devastating consequences (Dedousis-Wallace and Shute, 2009). Even the simplest actions are better than none because 'children who engage in aggressive behavior may interpret the resulting adult nonintervention as tacit approval of their behavior' (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004, p. 19). Indeed, when there is a negative school climate with no systematic support for victims and retribution for perpetrators, victims become fearful and unlikely to seek help while bullies only get more daring (Yoon, & Kerber, 2003; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Marachi, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007). Hughes, Middleton & Marshall (2009, p. 230) argue that 'everyone is placed at risk when adults fail to act'.

## **Materials and methods**

### ***Participants***

The pilot study took place in a large city situated in western Russia. Two secondary schools, representing two main types of schools in Russia, both with socially and economically diverse student populations, agreed to participate. One of the schools is comprehensive and accepts all applying students (SC1). The other school is selective and admits students after entry examinations (SC2). Neither school charges tuition fees. A total of 39 school children and 14 teachers participated in the study. The class group from SC1 had 20 eighth grade students (12 females and 8 males) and the other class group from SC2 had 19

eighth grade students (13 females and 6 males). 6 and 8 teachers respectively participated in the study, reporting their views on both bullying in general and the participating class groups' situations specifically. Because bullying peaks in middle school (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008), we chose to work with students ranging from 15 to 16 years old (eighth grade). Presumably, by the time students turn 15 they have a rich experience of school life and can reflect on earlier situations.

Bullying is a 'group phenomenon' and needs to be addressed and studied as such – focusing exclusively on either bullies or their victims does not provide the whole picture (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Voeten, & Sinisammal, 2004; Salmivalli et al., 2011). In view of this we focused on two whole class groups of students and their teachers (within the Russian system students are placed in fixed class groups – they attend all mandatory subjects together throughout the whole duration of schooling).

The participating teachers granted written consent. The students gave verbal assent and their parents provided written consent. All participants were repeatedly reassured that their responses were anonymous and that numeric codes would be used to record their responses. The pseudonymized data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

### ***Measures (graphic vignettes)***

Our attempt to develop a new arts-based method (graphic vignettes) was motivated by the sensitive nature of our research area itself. Creative expression helps people reflect on unpleasant experiences and allows them 'to communicate what really happened to them before they can consciously accept the reality of their experiences' (Mak, 2011, p. 85). Neither the graphic vignettes nor the interview questions contained the word 'bullying' to allow for individual unguided thinking process. Participants were only explicitly asked about

the rates of bullying in their class at the very end of the interview – this enabled us to compare and contrast their experiences and beliefs with their personal definitions and perceived rates of bullying.

The set of four graphic vignettes was designed specifically for these pilot studies (the process of developing our methodology is detailed in our first article on the topic (Reference to be added)). All the main types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying) are reflected in the developed graphic vignettes (Appendix 1). Each vignette has missing story parts and is open to interpretation, which makes it possible for participants to creatively develop vignettes into very different situations (from innocuous misunderstandings and small accidents to deep animosity and fierce violence).

Participants worked individually for 20 minutes and were encouraged to use their personal experience as their main inspiration. After creating their own situations or stories, participants indicated if they viewed the incidents depicted in the vignette they had worked on as serious or not. In addition, they rated how frequent each of the incidents occurred in their own class group (on a scale from 0 to 10). We worked with students and teachers separately (teachers were absent from all activities involving students). The creative work was followed by face-to-face individual interviews.

## **Results**

### ***Graphic Vignette 1***

Students created three main types of scenarios from Vignette 1, which depicted one student refusing to work with another: 1) the teacher insists on her way and says that the two students do not have a choice; 2) the teacher allows them to work separately; 3) the teacher mediates the situation and explains that it is important to learn how to collaborate. Teachers only came up with scenarios 2 and 3. How these scenarios were distributed among the

participants and assessed in terms of frequency and perceived level of seriousness can be seen at Figure 1.

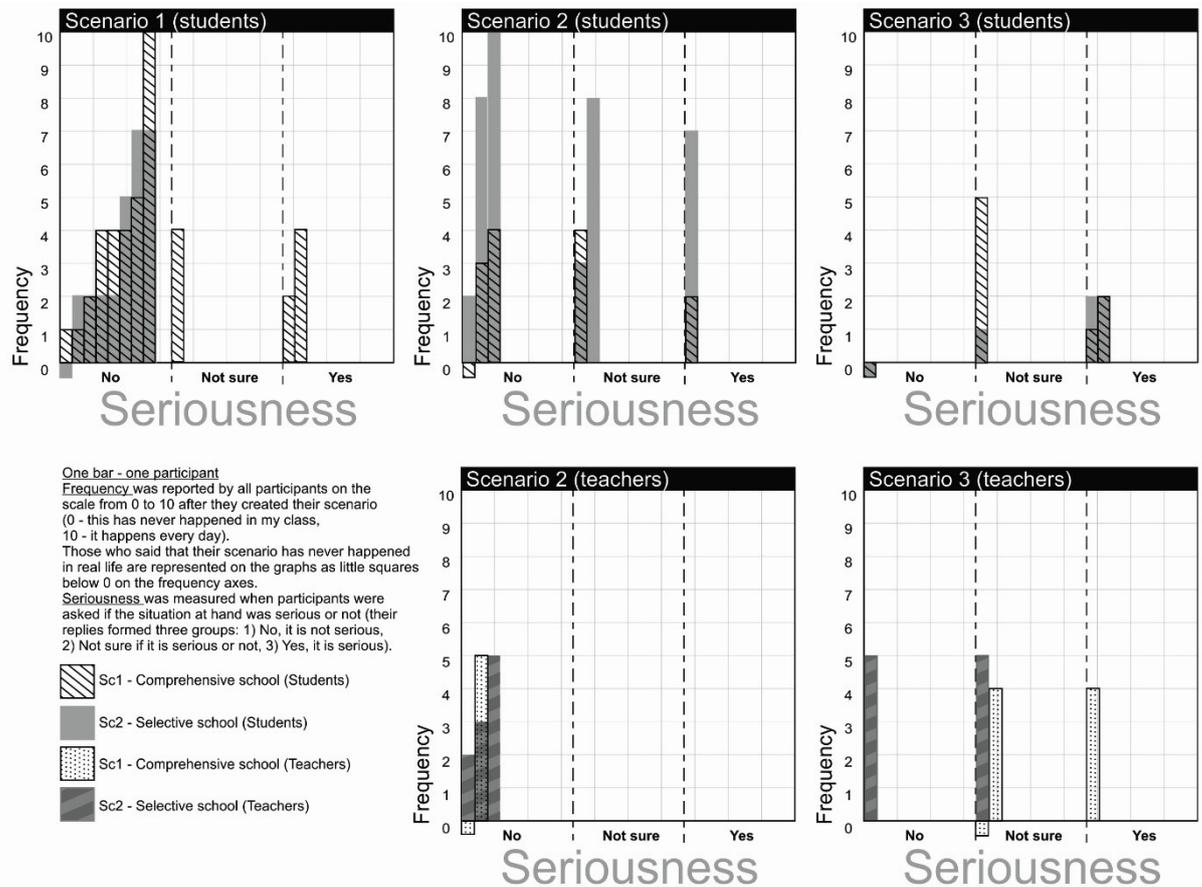


Figure 1 - Scenarios distribution within Vignette 1

Scenario 1 was the most common among students and one of its examples is in Figure 2. When commenting on her creative work, Student ID43 said: ‘This happened to me, too, once. The teacher told me to sit next to a boy but I didn’t want that so I said that it is embarrassing to be near him because that is how it was – really embarrassing...’. Over the course of the interviews some participants (ID22 and ID28) confirmed that Scenario 1 shows what often happens in their class. At the same time students (ID21 and ID28) say that teachers rarely address these situations in any way (i.e. the teachers are perhaps following Scenario 2). Scenarios 2 and 3 were equally common among teachers and one of their stories is shown in Figure 3. Out of all participating teachers only one discussed the perspective of

students and what they might think/say in this situation. Others looked at this situation only from the teacher's point of view.



Figure 2 (on the left). Scenario 1 created by Student ID43, SC1. Translation reads:

- Everyone has to work with their partners, boys with girls. That's it. I have nothing to add here.
- But he is so bad. It is embarrassing to sit next to him...

Figure 3 (on the right). Scenario 3 created by Teacher ID77, SC1. Translation reads:

- I will let children sit as they want.

### **Graphic Vignette 2**

In Vignette 2, teachers came up with two types of scenarios: 1) a student gets a string of hateful messages as a form of punishment for doing something wrong (lying to others, cheating, etc.); 2) a student gets abusive messages but another person (a friend outside

school, e.g. a classmate or mother) reaches out and offers support. In addition to the first two scenarios for this vignette, the students also created Scenario 3 and 4. Scenario 3 was formulated by the students as follows: a student gets bullied at school but after a while the bullies realize that what they are doing is wrong so they change their behavior and ask for forgiveness. Scenario 4 depicts a student suffering from peer aggression at school but the perpetrators always get away with it. How these scenarios were distributed among the participants can be seen in Figure 4.

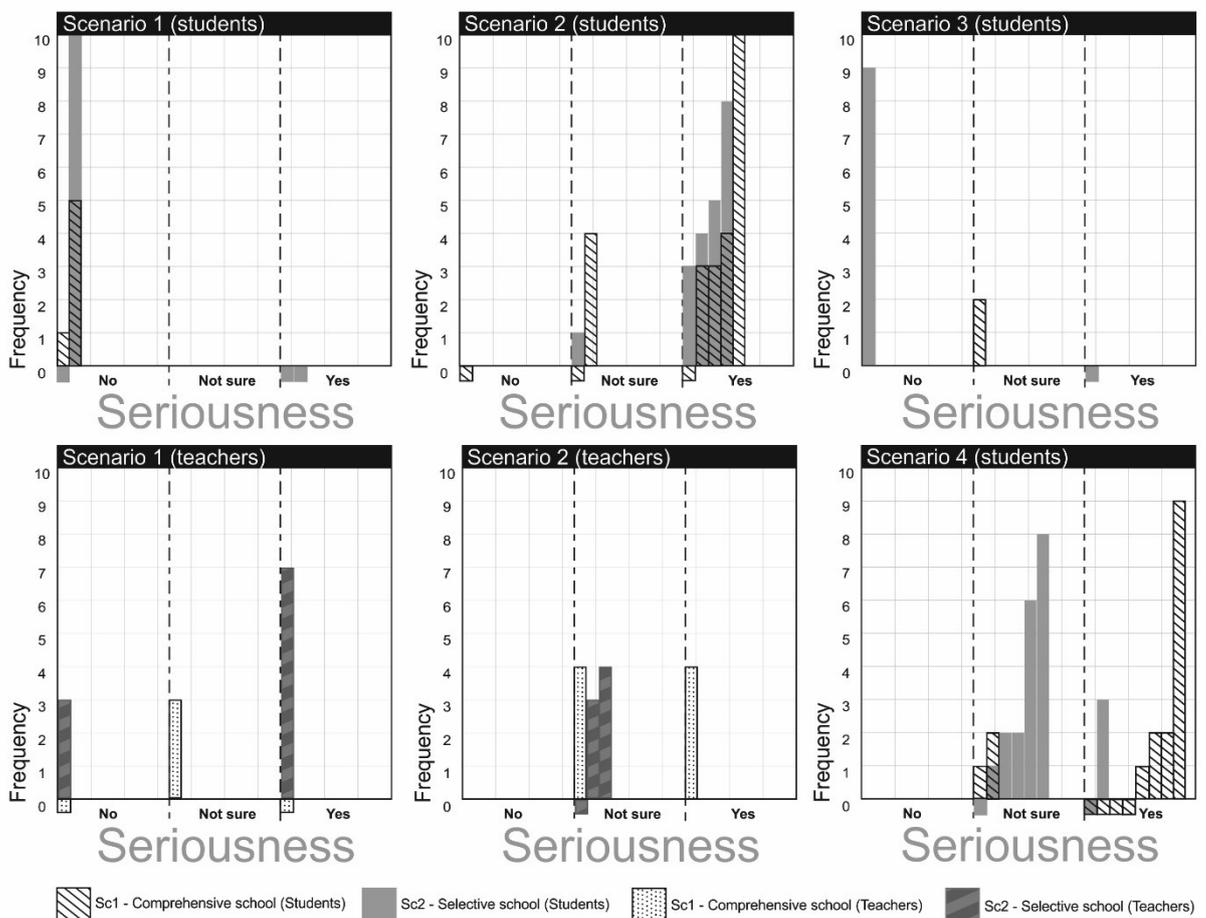


Figure 4 - Scenarios distribution within Vignette 2

The teachers from the comprehensive school (SC1) mostly created Scenario 1 and four of them (out of 5) saw the victims as provoking aggression.

Teacher ID69, SC1:

- (T) There are some students who have neither good looks nor a good brain.

Ugly ducklings. So they are trying to get attention with their behavior. In order to have attention for at least 2 or 3 minutes they are willing to demonstrate their stupidity. There are no students like that in this particular group of students but I do have students like that in other groups.

- (I) What is the role of teachers when these situations happen?

- (T) I think teachers should not pay attention to them. If you start criticizing or saying something it will make things worse.

- (I) How do you think students feel in this situation?

- (T) I think they are very sick if they are seeking attention this way. I think it all stems from their families – they are not getting attention from their parents, from their mothers most importantly (this respondent saw this situation as serious and reported its frequency as 0 for this class group).

Teacher ID77, SC1:

- Here I think it's the boy's own fault that he alienates people around him. First of all, we should examine his behavior. What often happens is that this type of people provoke others and this leads to alienation. Maybe he is a tattletale or something like that. Or maybe he treats others badly... (this respondent interpreted this situation as serious and reported its frequency as 3 for this particular group of students).

Teacher ID105, SC1:

- (I) Why do you think this situation most likely happened?

- (T) Why do they hate him? This boy is likely very quiet. He avoids group activities. He does nothing useful. So people don't see him rather than hate him. Maybe that's the case because he is passive and stays away from what others do. This is normal that they

don't accept him... (this respondent said that this situation was not serious and its frequency was 0).

Scenario 2 was the most common one among the teachers from the selective school (SC2) – all but one created their own version of this scenario. Only Teacher ID3 created Scenario 1 and indicated in the interview that the victim provoked peer aggression. The rest of the teachers stressed either that this situation had never happened in their school or that for them personally it was impossible to see situations like this:

- This situation has never happened. The children in this class can be difficult sometimes – they are very loud and quick-tempered but they don't have an outsider – it's just not the case... (Teacher ID5, SC2; this respondent could not assess the seriousness and indicated its frequency in class as 0).

- I have never witnessed any bullying like that. They don't bully openly and it is impossible to notice hidden bullying situations happening through their phones or something – I have no access to that (Teacher ID6, SC2; this respondent reported this situation as serious and indicated its frequency as 0).

The classroom teacher from the selective school (Teacher ID11, SC2), however, indicated the frequency of this situation as 7 and commented it as:

- There is one girl in this class, she is very antisocial... Yeah, we have one girl like that. She doesn't talk to anyone at all; she is a wallflower – always at a distance from others...

The classroom teacher from the comprehensive school (Teacher ID14, SC1) said that she sees this kind of peer aggression and exclusion in every class group:

- This is a really serious situation because in any class group there is always one or two children who always get excluded – they don't speak the same language as everyone

else and can't fit in (this respondent indicated that this situation is serious and its frequency was 4).

Many students created different versions of Scenario 4. One of their scenarios is provided in Figure 5 (Student ID42, SC2). She said about her scenario:

- Maybe teachers could talk to their students... But if there is this difficult situation then I think students need to work it out on their own and adults shouldn't get involved... Unless there is something really serious – if that is the case then teachers need to offer help.



Figure 5. Scenario 4 created by Student ID42, SC2. Translation reads:

- Louisa, why are you treating me this way?
- We are sick of you (hangs up).
- I loved them and valued them. Why do they do this? What is wrong with me?

Nine other students (SC1: Students ID7, ID42, ID43, ID46, ID51, ID53; SC2: ID27, ID28, ID31) repeated that teachers should only get involved in these situations if they become very serious:

- Our teacher did not know about this, of course. If these problems happen in our group, bullying and things like that, we shouldn't involve teachers in them. It is our life and we should sort things out ourselves. It is not going to be the last problem in this life so it's

better to try and deal with it on our own. If the problem doesn't go away then maybe talking to an adult is an option (Student ID53, SC1).

At the same time eight students indicated that teachers' support is very much needed in these situations (SC1: D17, ID41, ID47, ID55, ID57; SC2: ID09, ID25, ID30), however, very few pointed out that their teachers are able to provide it (SC1: ID12, ID46, ID55; SC2: ID09, ID24), with some adding that only their homeroom who addresses conflicts and bullying (SC2: ID09, ID19, ID26, ID28). The majority reported that their teachers don't see these situations and when they do they don't do anything helpful (SC1: ID7, ID17, ID37, ID39, ID40, ID43, ID47, ID51, ID53, ID55, ID56; SC2: ID19, ID20, ID27, ID34, ID35).

- I had a similar problem with a boy in the beginning of this academic year. When it was happening teachers kept saying 'well, guys, you don't have a problem, everything is fine, that's it'. So they weren't even trying to understand the situation. They didn't care about our feelings and what we were going through. The most important thing for them is to maintain an appearance that everything is fine at school; there are no problems, gossips and things like that (Student ID35, SC2).

- Teachers don't see these situations unless you tell them. Some (students) choose to share these things with teachers and we try to solve problems together with teachers but it rarely works out. (...) In these situations they (teachers) feel lost. They don't know what to do (Student ID19, SC2).

### ***Graphic Vignette 3***

This vignette, showing students are playing a ball game during a PE lesson, generated three main scenarios from both students and teachers: 1) a student accidentally gets hit in the face with a ball. The classmates apologize for this and the situation is resolved; 2) a student gets attacked with a ball during the course of a ball game. When the teacher inquires about the incident the attacked student shrugs it off saying that nothing happened; 3) a student gets

attacked with a ball during the course of a ball game. He reports this situation to the teacher.

Figure 6 shows how these scenarios were distributed among the participants.

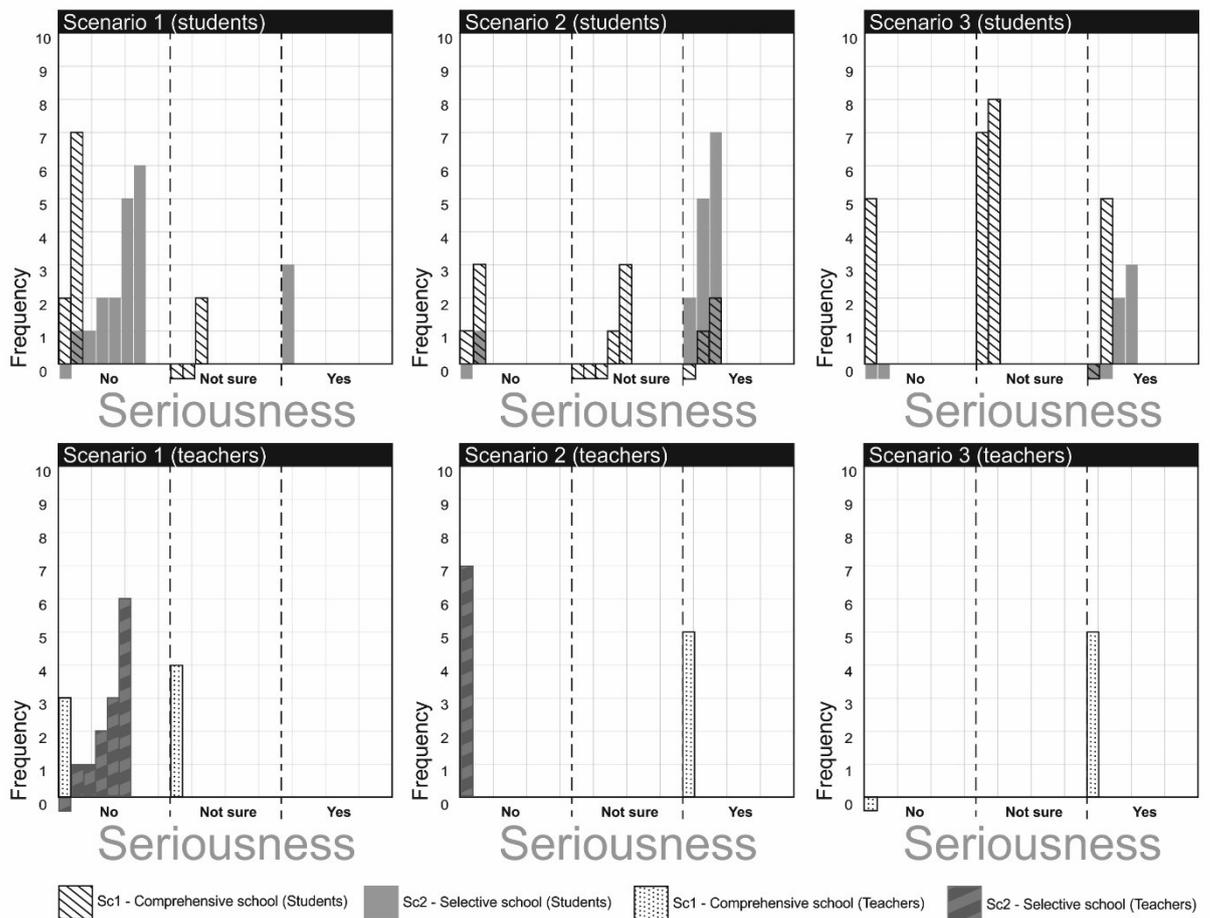


Figure 6 - Scenarios distribution within Vignette 3

Scenario 2 was the most common among the students and its example is provided in Figure 7 (created by Student ID46). Overall, when discussing this vignette, the most recurring theme was about not being able to share problems with others and report bullying. When discussing her scenario, Student ID46 said:

- I don't know what would be an appropriate course of action here. On the one hand, one would want to tell the teacher about this because this is just not OK. But on the other hand, ratting them out and complaining would be also bad, especially in front of all the classmates...



Figure 7. Scenario 2 created by Student ID46, SC1. Translation reads:

- (Students in the group on the left): Don't you dare tell on us.
- (Teacher): What happened?
- (Victim): It was an accident that I got hit with a ball.

In addition to that, nine more students reported that complaining or somehow letting teachers (and/or other adults) know about your problems can actually make things worse (SC1: ID12, ID17, ID53, ID56; SC2: ID29, ID30, ID31, ID35).

- We have a homeroom teacher who doesn't understand us at all. We are even scared of telling her anything at this point because she would immediately run off to our parents, stirring things up but we don't want that fuss (Student ID35).

The majority of teachers (8 out of 12) developed this vignette into a mere accident (Scenario 1), however, the importance of not reporting/sharing problems was also stressed in their interviews. Scenario 1 is exemplified in the work by Teacher ID2 (Figure 8). When discussing her scenario, Teacher ID2 said:

- I can't imagine them (students) complaining right away. They rarely complain because they usually sort these things out between themselves.



Figure 8. Scenario 1 created by Teacher ID2, SC2. Translation reads:

- (Victim): she didn't mean it, it was only an accident.
- (Students in the group): Wow, he didn't give it away!

Similar themes were raised by teachers in both schools, stressing that accidents are bound to happen but it is important to let them go.

- Well, here children threw a ball at this boy but then they apologized but this boy still decided to tell the teacher about getting hit with a ball. But the teacher said “well, they have already apologized, haven't they? Why are you still telling on them?”... I would give the following advice here – these guys need to be more careful next time and this boy... considering that they have already apologized to him, he needs to understand that nothing major has happened this time. It was just an accident. They didn't do it on purpose so he needs to let it slide this time (Teacher ID77, SC1).

At the same time one of the homeroom teachers, who is responsible for mediating in-class conflicts, indicated that it can be very difficult to establish if a situation is indeed an accident:

- (T) In these situations they will say that they didn't do it on purpose and this one will say ‘they are hurting me intentionally’. When I am in a situation like that I try to understand what the matter is. I do my best to find out if it really was an accident or not.

- (I) How do you go about establishing who is telling the truth?
- (T) I know that if you approach them as a group then there is chaos. It's just useless to try and talk to them as a group. But individual meetings are useful – this way it is possible to get down to what actually happened (Teacher ID11, SC2).

## **Discussion**

### ***Graphic Vignette 1***

The analysis of data derived from this vignette indicates that there is a noticeable difference between students' and teachers' reports. The majority of students reported in their interviews and through their graphic scenarios that teachers often insist on what they want without addressing the issue of exclusion or resolving any conflicts. Contrary to that, teachers reported either never experiencing such an issue in their class or always being able to address possible tensions and minimize exclusion. These contradicting accounts are in line with previous research – teachers and students often have very different perceptions of in-class social interaction and peer aggression (Stockdale et al., 2002; Holt & Keyes, 2004; Marshall et al., 2009).

Our findings here also support the social dominance theory (Pellegrini, 1995; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Participating students stated embarrassment to be one of the reasons to avoid interaction with some classmates. Indeed, if a classmate has been marked as somehow inferior to others then any contact with that classmate is likely to cause a feeling of embarrassment. This indicates that any association with a classmate considered inferior is seen as a threat to one's own social status (Pratto et al., 2006). These student reports illustrate that bullying is a 'group phenomenon' – student witnesses ('subordinates') often collaborate (sometimes unconsciously) with bullies ('dominants') to maintain in-class oppression (Pratto et al., 2006; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Salmivalli, 2014).

### ***Graphic Vignette 2***

Analyzing the data derived from this vignette revealed that the participating teachers either blame the victim (rationalize peer aggression as a justified reaction) or state that this problem does not exist in their school. None of the teachers and students created or discussed a scenario in which a teacher interferes to help the victim. In addition, the majority of students created scenarios and discussed actual cases in which bullies were not punished and victims received no support. Here the reports of teachers and students seem to be in line with one another – teacher inaction towards bullying has been confirmed both by teachers and students, though in very different ways. In this sense our data (participants' creative outputs and interviews) aligns with earlier studies (Olweus, 1991; 1993; Houndoumadi, & Pataeraki, 2001; Mishna et al., 2005) as it suggests that teachers are often unaware of bullying, underestimate the scale of it, or intentionally ignore it. This reality can be explained by a number of things.

The inability of teachers to take actions against bullying seems to be stemming from its normalization among the teachers in the comprehensive school (SC1) which was previously found to be a common reason for teachers' inertia (Crothers et al., 2006). Yet, the teachers and students from the selective school (SC2) mainly stress that bullying is difficult to detect as it is rarely reported – this reason has also been previously established (Unnever, & Cornell, 2003; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2015; Wiseman & Jones, 2018). In addition, the students from the selective school report that it is important for their teachers to maintain the front that their school is perfect. This can also be connected to teachers' inability or unwillingness to recognize bullying as a real issue.

Furthermore, Scenario 2 for Vignette 2 demonstrates that the perception of seriousness is very different among teachers and students in both schools. Despite the fact that half of all the teachers created this scenario, only one of them assessed it as a serious situation. This scenario was also frequent among students, though the majority of them clearly stated that

this situation is indeed, from their perspective, serious. Earlier research (Craig et al., 2000; Ellis & Shute, 2007; O'Brennan et al., 2014; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2017) highlights that the degree to which teachers perceive bullying as a serious issue directly relates to the likelihood of them detecting and taking action against bullying.

### ***Graphic Vignette 3***

In Vignette 3 here is once again an obvious contrast between teachers and students. The majority of teachers interpreted this vignette as a mere accident (Scenario 1), while most students developed this vignette into stories of overt physical aggression (Scenarios 2 and 3). Cross-analysis of all the data derived from this vignette indicates that teachers witness no physical peer aggression while some of their students see it regularly. At the same time there was a noteworthy similarity – both groups underlined the importance of not reporting such instances of peer aggression as ‘it only makes things worse’. In addition to that, our analysis reveals that teachers and students use the words ‘reporting’, ‘complaining’, ‘ratting out’, and ‘snitching’ as synonyms in the context of school bullying and there is an obvious negative connotation underneath all of these verbs. These findings also support previous works that victimized students often avoid reporting bullying out of fear of possible retaliation and further escalation (Unnever, & Cornell, 2003; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Wiseman & Jones, 2018).

### **Concluding remarks**

Our findings confirm that studies on sensitive topics can benefit from a wider use of arts-based research methods. The use of creatively co-constructed prompts in the course of an interview individualizes them and helps participants feel in control, which ultimately provides richer and more illuminating data. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge significant variations in how vignettes were developed and how frequency and seriousness were reported for each scenario despite the fact that the participants in the two groups (SC1

and SC2) study or work within the same two education environments. Varying perceptions of peer aggression will be investigated in more depth in a future study, however, previous research on this issue highlights that bullying-related perceptions are influenced by culture (Craig et al., 2000; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002) and specific personal experiences (Ireland & Ireland, 2003; Hymel et al., 2005). This means that if some people (students or teachers) do not see bullying, it does not mean that bullying does not exist, it just means that they are not suffering from it personally. Quantifying the exact scale of bullying, however, might be an impossible task even with the use of rigorous quantitative measures.

The main goal of the present study was to answer the following research question - if and how the perceptions of bullying differ between Russian students and their teachers. The main difference is that teachers either see no bullying at all or see it as a justifiable reaction. At the same time both the students and teachers think that victims should not report bullying. The reason behind this fact and its important implications for the wider education system can be understood through Figure 9. This scheme is explained below and shows how bullying can grow as a problem in Russian schools, where it is frowned upon to share one's problems (but more importantly, frowned upon to implicate someone else when sharing problems).

Teachers believe that peer aggression is a natural part of growing up and that it is often provoked by the victims themselves (Bochaver et al., 2015a). Having this mindset leads to the normalization of bullying within school communities (Crothers et al., 2006), which ultimately makes detecting and countering bullying behavior difficult. When people do not consider bullying to be a serious problem, they are less likely to notice and take action against it (Craig et al., 2000; Ellis & Shute, 2007; O'brennan et al., 2014; VanZoeren & Weisz, 2017). Moreover, this view of teachers affects both the witnessing classmates and the victims – they too come to accept bullying as unavoidable. In addition, victims expect no empathy or help if they come forward. When victims are not asking for help and teachers

take no action, other students (witnesses) get the sense that everything must be fine. Since this environment makes victims and witnesses unlikely to report any instances of bullying, teachers in their turn rarely receive any reports of bullying, which fortifies their view that there is no bullying or it happens rarely for a good reason. The unwillingness of teachers and other members of the school community to be proactive when addressing peer aggression is most likely interpreted by bullies as ‘tacit approval of their behavior’ (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004, p. 19; Dedousis-Wallace and Shute, 2009). This all creates a system of self-perpetuating bullying – a system in which there is no support for victims and no punishment for perpetrators, making victims and witnesses hesitant to report bullying while it continues to escalate (Yoon, & Kerber, 2003; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Marachi, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007).

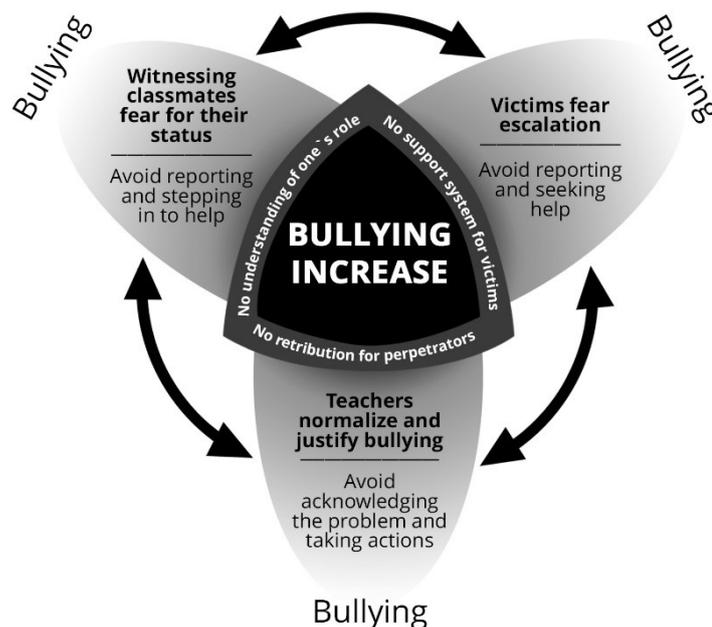


Figure 9. Bullying escalation snowball.

The combination of the teachers’ and students’ reports shows consistency with a number of past research studies, at the same time our study offers a new panoramic view on bullying in the context of Russia through the prism of the social ecological theory (Espelage

& Swearer, 2009, 2010; Swearer & Hymel, 2015) and contributes to the understanding of bullying not only as a group phenomenon, but also as a society phenomenon – the nature of school bullying, along with people’s attitudes toward it, reflect the wider society and interconnectedness within it.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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