
BULLYING EXPERIENCES: THE CASE OF PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

Anyone can experience bullying especially students. However, it cannot be discounted that teachers can also experience bullying from their students. Thus, there is a need to explore as well how teachers may have encountered bullying from their students. Using the descriptive phenomenological approach, this study aimed to explore bullying as experienced by the public secondary school teachers in a secondary school in Dapitan City, Philippines. Among the ten participants, only five participated and they had direct experience of bullying from their students. They taught Grades 7-10 students. Based on their narratives, they experienced aggressive and threats, disrespect and humiliation, and indifference from their students. Hence, even teachers as persons in authority are not exempted from the threats of bullying from their students. Their professional fulfillment and commitment were tested as they geared towards attaining normalcy and a positive classroom climate.

Keywords: *bullying, public school teachers, Dapitan City, phenomenology*

Introduction

In the educational arena, the ones who carry much responsibility are the teachers. They play a crucial role in the students' lives, and being second parents is just one of their many roles. Teachers' important professional duties include not only seeing to it that the educational objectives in schools are met but also assessing the learners' performance, maintaining peace and order, and taking care of the well-being of the students. Unfortunately, some students with their disagreeable behaviors throw negative thoughts towards teachers to the point of bullying them. Kauppi and Porhola (2012) asserted that several previous studies revealed that students bully many teachers worldwide which affects organizational climate, completed work's quality and quantity, and students' educational experiences.

Bullying of teachers happened by the four main sources which are students, colleagues, superiors and even the parents of the students. These bullying incidents are defined through the following criteria: (a) bullying is when someone directs aggressive behavior towards another party or intentionally hurts and harms another party, (b) bullying manifests repeatedly over a lengthy period, and (c) there exists such an imbalance of power

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between the party perpetrating the bullying and the party being subjected to bullying that the latter cannot defend himself or herself (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012).

Moreover, bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behaviors of a person or group to hurt, upset, and cause stress to a victim who is usually physically, mentally, socially, or psychologically weaker than the bully (Conn et al., 2004).

Bullying cases mostly happened in other countries. In Turkey, studies related to bullying showed reports that teachers have been exposed to violence by their students through verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual violence.

In addition, studies in China show that there were teachers who reported being cursed by their students. It was concluded that teacher-student relationships could be the reason why some students tend to be rude to them most of the time. Those positive gestures they showed have led the students to act ironically for thinking that they can easily throw inappropriate jokes at their teachers. It was clear that teachers are believed to maximize their ability in terms of classroom management. However, unexpected incidents such as bullying could be the reason why some of them lose their credibility in the field of education.

Furthermore, it is not only the students who bullied teachers but parents also. They could be driven by the force uttered by their children about making false accusations of their teachers' outward image and intellectual capacity. According to the study of Qiao and Bixi (2018), both American and Chinese teachers have reported their experiences toward parents who questioned their way of teaching and the way they judge professionally. In this matter, educators' responses showed that they felt powerless whenever they witnessed a parent damaging another teacher's reputation in front of other parents. This is one of the main reasons why some of them stated that their passion for teaching had changed after the bullying incidents.

According to Asio (2019), the concept of the teacher being bullied in higher education is usual yet disregarded to some extent because of its nature and its interpretation in the public eyes. Teacher bullying has not received the same attention as student bullying here in the Philippines. Teachers being bullied by students have only a few local studies and literature in the country. Most cases are always teachers who violently act against students.

In Manila, Philippines, Benjo Basas who was the chairman of Teachers Dignity Coalition (TDC), said that cases of students who bully teachers have been increasing in the country and the worst case so far was the teacher who had been stabbed and killed by a student in Caloocan City, Philippines. Basas also stated that the Department of Education (DepEd) should not just ensure the protection of children in schools but also the teachers (Tolentino, 2016).

Most school leaders believe that bullying of teachers does not exist in their establishment which explains why they take no responsibility for the reported workplace bullying incident. In Dapitan City, cases of bullying have not been reported yet to the school officials, teachers may neglect the problem rather than reporting it which most cases happened at secondary level than in elementary level. DepEd has its protection policy for the child, like, when scolding students in front of their classmates is considered bullying behavior; thus, teachers who conduct such form of supposed disciplinary action will face administrative liabilities, teachers have no courage to report students who bullied them. So, to give light to the issue, the researchers persevered to investigate the lived experiences of

the secondary teachers from the selected school in Dapitan City Schools Division who suffered bullying by their students. This study aimed to uncover the kinds of bullying that most public school secondary teachers in Dapitan City Division have experienced, which is believed of great help for the authority to carry on necessary actions to address the problem.

Method

This study utilized the descriptive phenomenological research to explore the bullying experiences of public secondary school teachers in Dapitan City. Further, phenomenological research concerns with the study of human perception of events or phenomena from the actual happenings in the real world. It helps relive the experiences of the participants involved in the study and go deeper into their thoughts, identifying the essence of the experience as described by the participants, through lengthy discussions (Tolentino, 2016). It is well suited for collecting data via in-depth personal interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In the case of the study, phenomenology was used to investigate the lived experience of public secondary school teachers who were the targets of student bullying. Out of ten purposively selected participants teaching Grades 7-10 at the selected secondary schools in Dapitan City Schools Division, Dapitan City, Philippines, only five participated during the interview. These participants were pre-interviewed to make assure that they experienced bullying from their students as one of the main criteria aside from being a teacher in secondary school in Dapitan City. The semi-structured interview was conducted to gather the data revolved on the main question: What are the bullying experiences of public secondary school teachers? The chosen key informants' identity was protected with the utmost confidentiality. They were asked for their pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Ethical Consideration

A letter asking permission was sent to the principals of the selected secondary schools of Dapitan City Schools Division before the conduct of the study. After given the consent and the permission to administer the study to the teachers, the researchers then approached the teachers and presented the letter asking permission to interview students bullying against teachers. Those teachers who refused to participate were replaced. The responses of the teachers were treated with the utmost confidentiality and their identity remained anonymous. Pseudonyms were utilized to hide their identity. In case, the participants choose to continue with the interview, they were informed that they are allowed to just cease doing it. The transcribed data were stored in a flash drive for the study only along with the recorded interviews which will be deleted one month after the researchers are done with the oral defense. These guidelines were lobbied to the participants to assure them that every data they shared were safe in the hands of the researchers.

Results

As the results of this study have revealed, the bullying incidents as experienced by the teachers as participants are not limited to one type only but come in many forms. This study has confirmed that indirect bullying such as purposely ignoring or isolating the teacher, nonverbal such as making offensive gestures and noises, staring, giggling, slamming or throwing objects or damage to teachers' property, and verbal bullying are experienced by the teacher. Teachers were encouraged to describe their experiences and the behaviors identified that solidified their perceptions of being victims of bullying.

Background of the Participants

The life and work of teachers are often shaped by their beliefs and knowledge, educational experiences, and perceived competence or self-efficacy, on the one hand, and by the changing macro-context of educational systems, the meso-context of school districts and schools, and the micro-context of individual teachers, on the other hand (Caena, 2003; Goodson, 2008). Below presents the short background of the participants:

Emilio, a 26-year old and single Mathematics teacher for three years described his life as very interesting. For him, every day is a challenge, hope, and inspiration. He stated that teaching is very challenging, since he wanted to be an effective teacher, he must achieve the desired learning outcomes of the lesson plan despite facing different behaviors of his students.

Cory, a single and 25 years old English teacher for four years. She stated that her life as a teacher is really tough and challenging for she was engaged in different activities which do not relate to her profession.

Gloria, a 22-year old, single, MAPEH teacher for two years expressed that her life as a teacher is challenging and tiring yet fulfilling. Gloria finds her job challenging for she needs to deliver her lesson on multiple types of learners. On the other hand, she also described her life as a teacher to be fulfilling when students are learning something from her.

Miriam, a 60-year old and a Mathematics teacher for 33 years described her life as a teacher as tiring and challenging.

MAPEH and Filipino teacher, **Juanito**, 31 years old and married, realized that teaching is full of responsibilities compared to other professions.

Experiences of the Participants

Facing the Challenge of Students' Diversified Behaviors

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, the behavior is an organism's activities in response to external or internal stimuli, including objectively observable activities, introspectively observable activities, and non-conscious processes.

As a backgrounder, teachers from different schools are handling a heterogeneous group of learners. Accordingly, the behavior of the students is diverse. In connection to this, Emilio compared his students to the sea - the tides are sometimes low and for other times are high. Similarly, the behavior of students inside the class changes every day. They show an active behavior at times and tend to become passive, hence Emilio said that:

“I can describe the behaviors of my students like a sea. There are high and low tides. There are calm and stormy seas. There are times that they are very highly active during my discussion that everyone is very willing to participate. At this point, I can reflect that I have used the right method in the instruction delivery since everyone is motivated to learn. There are also times that the class has a very low energy in performing the tasks. Some do not show any interest in learning and that they are not willing to participate during class discussion and activities. I find this sad, since I would reflect that the teaching methodology that I have used is not effective at the moment. I find this as a good opportunity for me to improve my teaching by having feedback on it. When it comes to behavioral discipline, there are times that my class is well behaved. Not any single sound you can hear from them. They will only respond when being called and do refrain from producing unnecessary noise. There are also times that the class is like chaos. Certain undesirable behaviors are observable. The noise level is so high that it can disturb other classes. This is challenging since I am dealing with different behaviors at the same time. One effective way to manage certain situations such as this is that I generate a certain way that I can catch all their attention and that all eyes and ears are on me. I make sure to find the common interest of all to take down noise level that allows me to talk. An example of it is giving such positive reinforcements to those learners who refrain from producing unnecessary noise.”

Similarly, Cory stated that her students have mixed behaviors in her class. She compared students from two different schools where she practiced her profession by saying:

“There is a mix of behaviors in my class. In my past teaching station, most of my students are indeed stubborn. No matter what type of intervention I give to them, it doesn't help at all. Even my co-teachers can't control them. I almost cried every night because I was very upset with my students. However, in my current teaching station, I can say that their behaviors are far better than that of the previous. Maybe there are childish acts, but I believe that's normal for students.”

On the other hand, Gloria handled different types of learners. She stated below that she encountered the most silent to the most chaotic students.

“...have come across different types of learners, from the most silent to the most chaotic. Most of the students are inattentive because of using gadgets inside the class (not paying attention), disturbing another student by making noise.”

Miriam verbalized that some of her students are respectful while others are rude by stating:

“Behavior of students under my class is mostly behaving but some of them are rude. Some students are respectful, and then some students are very unruly. That's why it's very important to set house rules.”

In the case of Juanito, he verbalized that sometimes he felt disrespected because of the behavior of his students. According to him, some of them are rude by remarking:

“Some of my students were formal and well-disciplined but there are inevitably students who are disrespectful and noisy. Most of my students during my class are talkative, bully, impolite, hardheaded, and attention seekers.”

The experiences of the teachers above present the classroom conditions that they are dealing with considering the diversified behaviors of their students. Some students pose

a disturbance in the teaching learning process as they are uncontrollable and manifested unruly behaviors.

Bullying Experiences

Teachers who are experiencing bullying in school find it difficult to spread a positive and safe environment in their classrooms. Bullying of teachers took many forms e.g. face-to-face confrontation, memos, cyberbullying, criticizing the work, making unreasonable demands on workload, sarcasm, and jokes aimed at the victim and also, undermining them by overruling their discussions and vows (Bhatia, 2013).

Physical aggression and insult. Aggression is one of the experiences of the participants that is described in terms of the threats and possible harm that they may acquire from their students. For instance, Emilio said that he has an aggressive student who purposely ignored him in his class and find it very uncomfortable when this students started making some misbehaviors. He expressed:

“I have a very aggressive student and all of his classmates are afraid of him. I find it very uncomfortable because he does start making unnecessary noise during class. Most of the time, he is the one that is causing trouble. He doesn’t give any attention to me whenever he is called. He won’t respond to even a simple “stand up” or “come here”. He insists on doing tasks and ignores my presence even when I am close to him. What I have done is I did a background check of him, like how is he treated at home. After that, I made a one-on-one friendly talk with him until I get his trust and started sharing his problem. I made him comfortable and accepted him in class. I help him to get back on track in his interest in learning. And now he is one of the performing students of my class.”

In addition, Cory experienced a form of physical harm from her students. For one time she said, *“I also encountered a student who throws objects during my class directed at me. One time, I was writing on the board when one student of mine throws a ball of paper at my back. I did ignore it first because I thought that it wasn’t intentionally aimed at me, but later on, I realized that there were pieces of balled paper on the floor next to me. I can feel the object that is thrown at my back and students were giggling and making fun of it. I warned him that if he does it again, I’ll send him to the guidance office.”*

What is worse is that Miriam felt threatened, *“When I knew that he was drunk, I immediately sent him home. It was very alarming for me that a student goes to school even if they are drunk, whereas supposedly students are not allowed to drink alcohol during class hours. I felt that it was unsafe for me and also for the other students because I know that drunk people are unpredictable and may cause harm. The school is supposed to be a haven for students, as well as teachers. I also felt insulted when students do other things during my class.”*

Gloria also had a share of her experience on aggression, she related, *“I gave him a chance to do the report again so that he would be able to recover from that mistake, instead of saying thank you to me, he got angry, walked out, and slammed the door in the middle of my class. I was very insulted that time. I gave him a chance so that he can cope up and get a better grade yet it went out that I’m the bad person for giving him extra work.”*

Disrespect and Humiliation. Aside from the threats of physical harm that teachers faced, they were also disrespected and humiliated by their students even in front of their classes. The following experiences described disrespect and humiliation.

In the case of Cory, she experienced non-verbal and indirect forms of bullying. One of her students stares at her when she warned the student to stop making noise during the discussion. She said:

“I experienced offensive gestures from my students like staring, slamming the door, and throwing objects in my class. One time, one of my students rudely stared at me because I warned him for being so noisy during my class. It was very offensive for me that he stares as if he was very angry for the reason of just giving him a warning. I also experienced that one of my students slammed the door.”

She further related: *“I insist to collect the given task. Instead of him passing his work, he walks out and slammed the door. It was very offensive for me to experienced that kind of attitude from my student. I was alarmed and felt disrespected due to the behavior that the student showed me.”*

The dominance of some students by way of showing control of the classroom is similarly experienced by Gloria. It is described in her words: *“I felt insulted because one of my students slammed the door instead of saying thank you. That student of mine was given a task to report. I wasn’t satisfied with the report of my student because he didn’t follow my instructions on the given task, so the report didn’t go well.”*

Even Miriam was very upset when she was disrespected by her students who showed a sense of control in the classroom which contested her authority. Miriam expressed: *“I was very upset that time when a student said “shut up” to me in front of my class. I scolded him because he also slammed the chair. That student of mine was intoxicated with alcohol. It was very disrespectful to see that my students aren’t interested during the discussion. Some of them are gossiping, using phones, and reading other books while I’m discussing. As a teacher, it makes me upset to know that they don’t even care to listen to my class. The students gave a headache and stress.”*

In the case of Juanito, her pronunciation was not spared by his students and whose attention was not in the class. He said, *“I felt insulted and discriminated when students laughed at my pronunciation. One time, I was discussing and reading the lesson when the students start gossiping and giggling. I told them to stop but instead of stopping them, they even laughed more. I asked what’s that noise all about. No one answers and later on, I’ve heard one of the students repeating words I’ve said. I continued the discussion and told them to keep quiet. I felt insulted and humiliated.”*

Indifference. The indifference among students is also evident as they don’t care with the class and felt the control of their behavior as if teachers are not present. For example, Cory expressed such experience, *During my class, I gave an activity to my students, one of them did not finish the task that was given to him, instead of working on the said task he is always roaming around inside the classroom. I told him to pass his work but he refused because he’s not yet finished. Some students also purposely ignore me during class discussions. It was disappointing. Realization comes up to me, it’s like they forgot to learn the core virtues that each of them should possess. It gave me a lot of stress and made me think to quit my job.”*

Discussions

Professional teachers described their lives as challenging, inspiring, fulfilling, tiring, and interesting. They added further that teaching is fun though full of responsibilities. Most of them claimed the teaching profession as challenging. They need to deliver each lesson with conviction. This is part of their calling. They are mandated to extend the mission of the Department of Education – to inculcate in the minds of the students the values and ethics in addition to drawing the lesson objectives to them as stipulated in their daily lesson plan. Delivery of instruction should be done efficiently and along with the discussion is the injection and integration of values to boost their morals. In attaining the desired learning outcomes of the lesson, these teachers should carry-out every lesson content with the lesson plan as a guide towards an effective teaching-learning process. In addition, series of activities should be given to the students regardless of their classroom behavior and sometimes carry-out other functions along with the duties and responsibilities. It is always a challenge for them to deliver content across multiple types of learners. These teachers are fulfilled as they felt satisfied upon knowing that their students are learning something from them. Though the students exhibited keeping up with the classroom requirements and surpassing the hurdles, joy is drawn on their faces every time they get the correct answer, or getting engaged in every activity or discussion, or when given accolades. Their single greeting gives a satisfying feeling. Indeed, the teaching profession among others brings about one realization: “Being a teacher is not an as easy task.”

Every school year, teachers encounter different types of students. The behavior of their students varies from their background and their experiences. Teachers describe their students as an ocean - calm and stormy. There are times that they are active during class discussions, there are also times they are not. Learners are diverse. Teachers encounter the most silent to the most chaotic ones. These behaviors accordingly form part of the concept of bullying. From the experiences of the teacher-participants, bullying took in the form of aggression, insult, disrespect, humiliation and indifference. This bullying specifically includes making offensive gestures and movements, staring, slamming the door, throwing objects, giggling or mocking, use of intimidating and threatening facial expression, eye contact, and body language. The teachers also experienced an indirect form of bullying such as purposely ignoring or isolating them. With these experiences, they felt disrespected, upset, uncomfortable, insulted, and humiliated. Teachers are disappointed because students tend to forget to learn the core virtues that each of them should possess. These gave them unforgettable experiences as secondary school teachers. These gave a huge impact on them as educators. Consequently, to avoid stress, they tried to ignore or just neglect the bullying incidents that happened throughout their teaching career. They believed that as teachers, it is their duty and responsibility to educate them than tolerating them. They are expected to imbue the heart of these student’s parents as *in locu parentis*, hence understanding diversity in the classroom is a crucial task they have to endure.

In Turkey, studies related to bullying toward teachers are very new and limited in number. Although it did not directly deal with bullying toward teachers, in a study conducted by the Turkish Education Union on the violence experienced in schools across Turkey, 23% of the 1010 surveyed teachers stated that they were exposed to violence by their students and 65.1%, 16.9%, 14.4%, and 3.6% of these teachers reported that they

suffered verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual violence, respectively (Türk Eğitim-Sen, 2009; Özkılıç, 2014). Studies conducted in different countries have shown that bullying directed at teachers by students is a significant concern for a large number of teachers at school (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; James et al., 2008; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2009; Terry, 1998). According to an extensive survey on the harassment and violence experienced by Finnish lower secondary school teachers by Salmi and Kivivuori (2009), 66% of the teachers surveyed had been subjected to insulting behavior by their students during their teaching career. Thirty percent had been subjected to harassment (for example, had their property been vandalized or their domestic privacy violated), 24% to the threat of violence, 11% to physical violence, and 8% to sexual harassment.

Moreover, the study of Kauppi & Pörhölä (2012) reported teachers having quite frequently been subjected to the following forms of bullying by students such as making fun of or laughing at the teacher, denouncing and name-calling, insulting gesticulation, hiding from the teacher, or coming late to class, unjust disparagement of the teacher's professional skills, and mimicking of the teacher's communication. The result of the aforementioned study correlates to the present study in which in the case of the participant, Juanito, his students make fun of his pronunciation and explicitly laughed at him. Due to his way of pronouncing some English terms, he was bullied by his students. Miriam on the other hand, experienced a form of non-verbal and verbal bullying when one of her students went to her class drunk and destroyed her property by slamming the chair and insulted her.

The present study also corroborates the findings of Caldwell (2017) that one of the common occurrences of student-teacher bullying involves an interruption of lecture time. In Miriam's experienced, her students don't pay attention when students do other things while she is discussing. With these experiences, teachers felt disrespected by their students. However, one of the participants considers that rudeness is just a form of childish acts and is said to be normal for kids. Moreover, these statement correlates to the study of Caldwell (2017) which indicates that teachers who viewed their encounters as personal attacks found solace in knowing that the perpetrators were kids and they change and mature over time. The thought process associated with this line of thinking may be a result of teachers not wanting their level of competency questioned.

The bullying incidents experienced by teachers added to the stress they already have. As researchers stated in the result of their study, victims experienced psychological, physiological, and even emotional stress (Wilson et al., 2011; Caldwell, 2017). Thus, stress, anxiety, and depression are common effects experienced by teachers exposed to victimized teachers. Due to stress, some of the negative symptoms verbalized during the interview process are said to leave teachers expressing their desires to quit their jobs, change careers, or reduce interaction with various students (Caldwell, 2017).

Conclusion

The lived experiences of teachers in Dapitan City showed the most common bullying type. They experienced the non-verbal form of bullying in their life as a teacher. When these teachers are thrown off with offensive gestures like ignoring and irritating noises, staring, giggling, slamming, or throwing objects or damage to or theft, they can become psychologically distracted. This alone compromises their professional fulfillment and an influential factor towards attaining normalcy and a positive classroom climate if not

handled properly. Given the dedication of the teacher-participants, it is noteworthy, however, that there is tolerance and resistance against such negative behaviors among their students. It is safe to say then that as teachers, they continued to put forth their calling and signified their dedication as being agents of socialization. These teachers do not fail to promote a meritorious classroom, promoting healthy relationships among students and forwards putting-up positive interactions.

Though they felt disrespected and insulted by these experiences that led them to the point of just quitting from the job because of the stress due to their experience still they manage to ignore this indelible mark on them. To avoid these stressors, these teachers ignore bullying incidents instead take them as part of their teaching experiences. Overcoming them is necessary and stretching their patience and expanding their understanding are significant.

Since there is already a policy protecting the child from bullying, it may be imperative that there should also be a policy protecting teachers from inappropriate behaviors of the students. Hence, two-way protection shall be in place for both teachers and students for a better teaching and learning experience in which no party is being at a disadvantage.

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