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Student-Teacher Relationships and Their Associations with Pro-Social Motivation and Bystander Behaviors in School Bullying

Tomas Jungert, Nathalie Iotti, Claudio Longobardi & Robert Thornberg

Bullying is a social process where many students not directly involved as bullies or victims often are present as bystanders, who can respond with pro-bullying (assisting and joining the bully or supporting the bully by cheering and laughing), passive bystanding, or defending the victim. Self-determination theory proposed that autonomous motivation reflects a person's volition, values and interests, and predicts stronger persistence than extrinsic motivation. The need for relatedness, which refers to the wish to have warm and caring bonds and positive alliances with others, is one of the basic needs that are required for autonomous motivation. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether two dimensions of student-teacher relationships (warm vs. conflictual) were associated with autonomous and extrinsic motivations to defend victims in bullying situations, as well as whether these types of motivation were associated with pro-bullying and defending among students. Four-hundred participants were recruited from 18 school classes (4th to 9th grade) from 6 public schools located in urban areas in Sweden. They completed a survey in their classroom (89 % response rate). Structural equation modeling was performed in EQS. The result showed that a warm relationship with teachers was positively associated with autonomous motivation to defend, whereas a conflictual relationship was positively associated with pro-bullying. Moreover, autonomous motivation was positively associated with defending and negatively associated with pro-bullying. In contrast, extrinsic motivation was negatively associated with pro-bullying. Multiple mediation analyses confirmed the positively mediating role of autonomous motivation in the relationship between warm teacher-student relationships and defending, and the negatively mediating role of autonomous motivation between warm teacher-student relationships and pro-bullying. In conclusion, the findings support the notion that autonomous motivation to defend is important for students' predisposition to defend victims in bullying situations and that teachers should build warm and caring student-teacher relationships to enhance students' inclination to defend the victims in practice. Our findings also confirm that conflictual student-teacher relationships are associated with negative behavior, which even more highlights the benefits of warm and caring student-teacher relationships for schools who want to prevent or minimize acts of bullying in the school.