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## Understanding Teacher-targeted Bullying: Commenters' Views

### Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a qualitative content analysis of Internet commenters' postings on teacher-targeted bullying (TTB). Postings on the website *The Educator's Room* were used as data. The study found that the commenters perceive TTB to be a serious and escalating problem characterised by an imbalance of power and an intention to do harm, and consider it repetitive and enduring in nature. The study furthermore found that the commenters view TTB as the physical and verbal abuse of teachers by their learners. This study has shown that, despite ethical dilemmas, social media can be a rich data source when investigating TTB. It is concluded that individual teachers' postings about their public and private humiliation and pain are globalised and made accessible to researchers and laypersons alike through use of a medium that transcends borders.

Keywords: commenters, definition, educator-targeted bullying, postings, social media, teacher-targeted bullying

### Introduction

Advances in technology allow easy access to the Internet in most parts of the world, which led to the number of social media users growing considerably worldwide. Social media are 'online, often mobile, platforms that support the creation and exchange of user-generated content' (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018, p. 2). Social media include, but are not limited to, broad platforms for networking and sharing that act as the curator of content, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn, and online forums aimed at specific communities (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018).

The posting of videos of school violence in general and teacher-targeted bullying (TTB) specifically created awareness of this scourge and resulted in public outcry (Jordaan, 2018). Postings on social media of learners abusing their teachers may, however, move beyond the sensational and create a broad platform for networking among victimised teachers and sharing information on the phenomenon. One such platform is *The Educator's Room*, which aims to empower 'teachers as the experts in education'. On 6 May 2013, Sarah Sorge posted an article, 'The bullied teacher', on *The Educator's Room*. Sorge (2013) invited the readers of her post to share their experiences and suggest possible solutions to the problem. Over a period of five years (6 May 2013 – 23 May 2018) 66 readers posted comments in response to Sorge's article and/or responded to fellow commenters' comments. A commenter is a person 'who expresses an opinion or engages in discussion of an issue or an event, especially online in response to an article or blog post' (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.). Only five of the commenters who took part in the Internet conversation were not victims of TTB.

The richness and forthrightness of the commenters' postings motivated me to utilise their comments as research data to get a better understanding of TTB. This paper aims to answer the following questions: (1) Is TTB a widespread, escalating occurrence? (2) What understanding do the commenters who took part in the Internet conversation have of TTB? In this paper, I will furthermore suggest that the postings of the individual teachers are globalised through the use of a medium that transcends borders, and that social media postings may be used as a data source for researchers.

## What is TTB?

Definitions of bullying usually include the following three criteria: (1) aggressive behaviour directed at another person with the aim to hurt or cause harm; (2) repetitive, enduring negative behaviour; and (3) a power imbalance between the victim and the bully, which may result in the victim not being able to defend him- or herself (cf. Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012, p. 1061). The third criteria may be problematic when defining TTB, because teachers are supposed to have 'power' over their learners. Taking these criteria and dilemmas into consideration, Kauppi and Pörhölä (2012, p. 1061) define TTB as:

*... a communication process in which a teacher is repeatedly subjected, by one or more students, to interaction that he or she perceives as insulting, upsetting or intimidating. Bullying can be verbal, non-verbal or physical in nature.*

Sorge's (2013, p. 2) definition of bullying reads as follows:

*Bullying is the use of superior strength and influence in order to influence and/or intimidate others in order to reach the desired outcome.*

The latter definition acknowledges the imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator, as well as the intentionality of the negative acts. Sorge's (2013) definition is, however, silent about the repetitive nature of the negative act(s).

These two definitions as well as the stated criteria will act as a framework for my description of the commenters' understanding of TTB.

## Research methodology

A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design was employed to gain insight into commenters' understanding of TTB.

An increasing quantity of material that is for the most part 'public, permanent and searchable' is published by millions of social media users worldwide (Giglietto, Rossi & Bennato, 2012, p. 145). However, the use of social media as a data source is a rather new trend. An extensive study by Taylor and Pagliari (2018, p. 2) highlights the numerous uses of social media in research, such as assessing commenters' 'responses and sentiments towards particular topics'. Farnan (2014, p. 62) moreover found that data from social media platforms has been successfully used to describe public health issues and has demonstrated a high level of correlation with other forms of public health surveillance.

During August 2018, I did several Internet searches on TTB, using phrases such as: 'teachers being bullied', 'bullied teachers', 'teachers being bullied by pupils' and 'teacher-targeted bullying'. I also used synonyms such as 'educator', 'learner' and

'student'. My search resulted in the identification of numerous academic studies and newspaper articles available on the Internet, as well as comments on social media websites. Even though I read scores of the identified comments on the topic on social media, I cannot claim that I worked through the entirety of social media before identifying comments on the article by Sorge (2013) available on *The Educator's Room* as my data source. The sheer size of the World Wide Web makes such an undertaking impossible and improbable.

My decision to use data emanating from a social platform to gain insight into the phenomenon resulted in an ethical conundrum. *The Educator's Room* is not password or paywall restricted; any Internet user has access to the website. Comments by victims of TTB have thus been placed in the public domain. Even though the commenters were requested by Sorge (2013) to post their comments anonymously, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not all commenters used pseudonyms. Some posts are placed under what may be the commenter's own name or name and surname (e.g. Mary, Doreen, Pam Jacobson, Diana S. Rice) while other commenters obviously used pseudonyms (e.g. JAD, 'Bullied by mean girls'). In this paper, I will use the names, surnames and/or pseudonyms of the commenters as it appears on the website. Taylor and Pagliari (2018, p. 3) rightly argue that one of the greatest challenges for researchers utilising social media as a database is the 'unclear boundaries between "public" and "private" spaces'. They furthermore note that 'consent to the use of social media data in research is rarely obtained through informed choice but rather assumed on the basis that users have chosen to place it in the public domain'. I tried to engage with the commenters' postings in a respectful manner, and did not trivialise their humiliating experiences and pain.

Henning's (2005) guiding principles for qualitative content analysis were followed to reduce, condense and group the content of the postings on the website. To improve the trustworthiness of my findings, I tried to facilitate transferability by providing thick descriptions that may 'enable judgements about how well the research context fits other contexts' (Li, 2004, p. 305) and juxtaposed findings from the current study with those of other studies on TTB (Shenton, 2004). Readers of this paper can freely access the data on which this paper is based (<https://theeducatorsroom.com/the-bullied-teacher/>). Readers will thus be able to critique my findings. The absence of specific criteria to guide my decision to utilise comments from *The Educator's Room* (and not another website) as research data may lessen the integrity of this study.

## Findings

### *The prevalence of TTB*

While researchers (De Wet & Jacobs, 2018; Woudstra et al., 2018) found that TTB is a worldwide phenomenon that has been researched since the 1970s, some of the commenters on the website seem to be stunned that they are not the only victims of TTB. Reading about their colleagues' similar experiences and sharing their personal victimisation is important to Tiffany and Margaret: 'I am so glad to see this article and be able to read all these messages. I am being cyber bullied...' and 'I think this article and these comments show how little people know of how bad it is'. In addition, Pablo wrote:

*I am surprised that the ‘bullied teacher’ term actually exists ... I looked for it and found this website and didn’t know this forum actually had a lot of people sharing the same experience as I have.*

The posts create the impression that TTB is on the increase. Doreen, who has been teaching for 35 years, wrote that ‘the climate of the classroom and student behavior changed drastically over the years’. Likewise, Sandra Delgado wrote that:

*... as a veteran teacher, I always shrugged off students’ inappropriate comments as immature behavior. Now, with technology at their fingertips bullying is alive and well ... I have never experienced bullying like this school year.*

Lisa concurs with the view that TTB is escalating: ‘It is progressively getting worse’. Jacques Tobin wrote on 27 March 2018: ‘I taught school for 25 years, and the last 3 or 4 were complete misery’. Carol Nevius, on the other hand, believes TTB has been part and parcel of the plight of a teacher for a long time (‘Over the years, there have been many instances of bullying against me, the teacher.’).

Whereas websites such as *The Educator’s Room* and research (e.g. De Wet & Jacobs, 2018; Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012; Woudstra et al., 2018) create an awareness of the prevalence of TTB, a scarcity of large scale quantitative longitude studies (cf. Köiv, 2015) hinder the affirmation of the views of several commenters that TTB is on the increase. It should be noted that only five of the 66 commenters who took part in the Internet conversation were not victims of TTB. People who post comments on a website usually have an interest in the topic under discussion. It is thus understandable that the comments on TTB are nearly always about their and/or others’ negative experiences.

### *Commenters’ understanding of TTB*

Numerous commenters described in detail how they were verbally and physically abused and humiliated by their learners on the school grounds, in classrooms and public spaces, and on social media. An analysis of these comments gives insight into the different types of TTB and the core characteristics thereof.

Commenters were verbally abused by their learners. Katherine wrote about a 16-year-old boy who ‘talked down to [her], insulted [her], and then called [her] ugly’. Marilyn Bullard recalled that she was ‘openly ridiculed, mocked, and talked about as though [she was] not even there’. Correspondingly, Ellen wrote that one of her bullies ‘constantly makes stupid remarks to be funny’ while her other bully ‘lets loose with a bunch of rude comments’. Numerous commenters were the victims of false allegations that harmed their personal and professional lives. AJ Coco wrote in this regard, ‘I have had every lie one can think up reported about me and spread throughout the school’. The teacher quoted above was, among other things, accused ‘of using drugs during school and ... coming to school “high as a kite”’. Deborah was accused of ‘forcefully’ throwing a pen at one of her bullies. Commenters were also accused of racism (‘Bullying by mean girls’), unfair treatment of learners (Marie), sexual harassment (Kelly Fritschy) and physical assault (Nate NC, Deborah). Some of the commenters were subjected not only to verbal but also physical bullying. A substitute teacher wrote that the learners ‘just call [her] names [and] throw things at [her]’. Jill Mehlinger, another victim of multiple forms of bullying, wrote ‘I have been bullied, threatened, cursed at, lunged at, pushed, and

belittled'. A beginner teacher wrote: 'There is constant disrespect, talking back, fighting, destruction of my property [and] threats against my safety'.

Even though the majority of commenters described incidents of TTB perpetrated on the school grounds or in classrooms, Georgia, a substitute teacher, recalled that her victimisation was not limited to the school setting. She resides in the community where she teaches. One evening, when she was out to dinner with her family, she saw the learners who bullied her in the classroom. The bullies walked up to her, and, in front of her husband and children, laughed out loud and said to her: 'You're that stupid f\*ing sub. I am going to get you fired'.

Four commenters wrote that they were the victims of cyberbullying; a form of bullying that transcends physical boundaries. Saundra Delgado wrote the following:

*... with technology at their fingertips bullying is alive and well. I have been negatively exposed on snapchat, twitter and instagram more than anyone should be posted on these social media sites.*

Tiffany's comments highlight the all-encompassing public nature of cyberbullying:

*[The bully] spread allegation[s] anonymously on a public post on social media, rephrasing what I said in class with exaggerating adjectives, saying that I humiliated and threatened her in class. Many people left comments saying that she should call the police and find a lawyer to sue me. Many people used bad words to call me and keep sharing it to others in order to 'give me a lesson to learn about respect'.*

Attention will now be given to findings regarding core characteristics of bullying (cf. Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012) as it crystallised from the data. Theoretically, teachers have power over their learners on the grounds of 'their position as teachers' (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012, p. 1061). Teachers may, however, be disempowered when learners gang up against them, and/or openly defy them. This may result in teachers abdicating their power and finding themselves in a situation where they are unable to defend themselves from abusive, bullying learners. The following three comments by bullied teachers illustrate that TTB can be characterised by an imbalance of power. Pablo wrote that he is 'basically being walked over' by two of the learners in his class. Katherine described how two high school learners belittled her, and 'talked down to' her. Marilyn Bullard wrote: 'I often feel bullied, openly ridiculed, mocked, talked about as though I'm not even there'.

TTB is not an impulsive act, the bullies usually intentionally set out to harm or hurt their victims. Numerous commenters wrote that they were the victims of malicious lies, because their bullies wanted to get them fired (e.g. AJ Coco, Marie, Bullied). It also seems as if minor incidents are blown out of proportion: 'If the teacher resists [in giving the learners extra marks], they report some minor offense of the teacher to the administrators of the school' (Shannon Stoney). The bullies not only set out to harm their teachers, but are often successful in their pursuit: teachers were 'repeatedly written up with disciplinary notices' (Margaret), being 'investigated' for fabricated transgressions (Anne), and fired (AJ Coco). Karen H noted that she was left with little recourse than to resign, 'because no matter what I said or did, Admin ALWAYS believes the students'. Jill Mehlinger believes that she is 'being forced into early retirement' because of the 'hostile and unsupportive environment' she is working in. This may have dire financial consequences for her:

'I will have to pay out of my pocket for health insurance, and settle for a lower pension since I am not 65 years'.

The study found, in line with previous studies by De Wet (2010) as well as De Wet and Jacobs (2018), that TTB may have serious negative consequences on the victims' professional lives. Some of the commenters lost their passion for teaching. Debbie Whitlock-Roush wrote, for example, that she 'hated every minute of that class'. Jacques Tobin 'hated' his job as a teacher and 'dreaded every moment' thereof. This may inadvertently result in an increase of absenteeism (Karen H). Numerous victims were upfront about the impact of TTB on their physical and mental health (e.g. Michelle Gengaro, Nate NC). Victims wrote that they take anti-anxiety medication (e.g. Andrea Burgos, MW, Shari L Rivera) and/or sleeping pills (MW). Karen H was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder.

Findings from this study resonate well with findings from other studies that also emphasise the repetitive nature and longevity of TTB (e.g. De Wet & Jacobs, 2018). Commenters used phrases such as 'I have been bullied... every day since school began in August' and 'There is constant disrespect...' to emphasise the repetitiveness of the bullying.

## Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to use data posted on social media to gain insight into commenters' understanding of the prevalence and nature of TTB. A prevalence study by Kõiv (2015) support a finding from this study, namely that TTB is an escalating and serious problem. Findings from this study, specifically that teachers are physically and verbally bullied by their learners in their classrooms, on school grounds, in public places and on the Internet, is in line with findings by other studies on the different types of TTB (De Wet, 2010; Kõiv, 2015; Woudstra et al., 2018). Findings from this study are furthermore supported by studies (De Wet, 2010; Garrett, 2014; Woudstra et al., 2018) that established that bullies intentionally set out to harm their teachers' private and professional lives, bullying is repetitive and enduring in nature, and it is characterised by a power imbalance between the bully and the teacher. It therefore seems as if findings emanating from comments on *The Educator's Room* in reaction to Sorge's article may be considered trustworthy.

This study has shown that, despite ethical dilemmas, some social media websites can be rich data sources for investigating TTB. Individual teachers' postings on their humiliation and pain are globalised and made accessible to researchers and laypersons alike through use of a medium that transcends borders. Users of social media as a data source should, however, always be aware of the fact that they are working with data that was not originally intended to be used in research and that the commenters did not give informed consent for the use of their comments.

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