

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers who bully students: a hidden trauma

Stuart W. Twemlow, M.D.*; Peter Fonagy, Ph.D., FBA**; Frank C. Sacco, Ph.D.***;
John R. Brethour Jr., M.S.****

*Professor of Psychiatry, Menninger Department of Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine . Houston , Director Peaceful Schools and Communities Project and Medical Director HOPE unit, The Menninger Clinic, Houston Texas.

**Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis, UCL, London, England; Director, The Anna Freud Centre, London, England

***President, Community Services Institute, Boston & Springfield, Massachusetts;
Adjunct Professor at Western New England College, Springfield, Massachusetts

****Formerly, Statistical Laboratory, Child & Family Center, Menninger Clinic, Topeka, Kansas

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Child & Family Program, Menninger Dept Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine,
Houston Texas

Reprint requests and correspondence to:

Stuart W. Twemlow, M.D.
The Menninger Clinic
PO Box 809045,
2801 Gessner Drive.
Houston TX 77280-9045.
stwemlow@aol.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective : The study examined teachers' perceptions of bullying by other teachers to see what causes and characteristics were attributed to such bullying teachers, and how often teachers were themselves bullied by students.

Method: 116 teachers from 7 elementary schools completed an anonymous questionnaire reflecting their feelings and perceptions about their own experiences of bullying , and how they perceive colleagues over the years.

Results confirmed that teachers, who experienced bullying themselves when young, are more likely to both bully students and experience bullying by students both in classrooms and outside the classroom. Factor analysis revealed two types of bullying teacher: a sadistic bully type and a bully-victim type.

Conclusions : The implications for the mental health of children and for effective teaching are discussed., in the light of widespread recognition of the traumatic effects of bullying on childhood development.

Our interest in teachers' perceptions of other teachers who bully students and students who bully teachers resulted directly from our investigation of ways to reduce violence in schools. In this work (Twemlow et al. 2001a; Twemlow et al. 1996; Twemlow et al. 2000), we use an open system psychodynamically informed model for interventions focused on dealing with power struggles, and in particular ameliorating power dynamics (the conscious and unconscious causes of power struggles) between students, teachers, parents and support personnel in schools.

Our initial attempts at altering coercive power dynamics by focusing on problem children only were not successful because of the significant teacher involvement in these power dynamics. This insight emerged anecdotally. In one school, the custodian was covertly threatening and coercing students. (He had escaped a police screening and had a background of violent assault.) In another school, we found that a prominent administrator had a grandchild at the school who was a major bully. No one would complain about this child because of the powerful position of the administrator.

In yet another setting, admittedly extreme, physical violence by teachers was an accepted part of the way teachers functioned. In one situation, a boy was observed to have his head cracked on the wall by a teacher, and later when interviewed that same boy didn't remember the incident. When reminded, he indicated that was how you "usually learn things in this school." Devine, (1996), has pointed out that some teachers use the "code of the streets" (tough language, four letter words, intimidation, tough demeanor, and tough posturing), as a way to exert power and authority. Often children

and even other teachers and principals praise such teachers as being effective. They are respected because they are people not to be messed with. What is communicated is not a culture of respect, civility and recognition of the rights of others, but a street culture of might-is-right. In the end children will do what they have to to get by, but fear impairs the capacity to learn.

In conversations with principals of schools in many parts of the United States, the issue of teachers who bully students was known to many principals, some of whom would not place certain vulnerable students with certain teachers. No clear way had been found to handle or even assess the prevalence of such a problem within school systems. To our knowledge, the dearth of papers on the topic of teachers who bully students is further support for such a speculation, and there are only a few more papers on students who bully teachers.

In contrast, there is a large literature on workplace bullying of employees, particularly in the United States. The literature focuses on sexual harassment (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981; Berdahl et al. 1996) and ethnic factors (Davidson and Earnshaw, 1991) and less on sexual orientation (Shrier, 1996) and physical handicaps (Davidson and Earnshaw, 1991).

Paul & Smith, (2000), used a technique of letter writing by student teachers to train them to recognize good teachers and teachers who bully from their memories of their own school experiences. “ Negative pedagogy” is the term Paul and Smith used to

define teaching techniques that are coercive. Six areas of teaching were identified as typical ways teachers misuse their power: (1) discipline and student relationships, (2) evaluation, (3) student grouping, (4) classroom/school procedures and rules, (5) instructional practices, and (6) physical plant/resources.

This study is not meant to victimize or persecute teachers, an already beleaguered and underpaid profession in the United States of America. The majority of teachers in spite of significant job stress are thoroughly dedicated to children and often sacrifice their personal free time to do extra work to ensure that the work that they do with children is helpful.

Most public school teachers in the United States are part of collective bargaining groups that represent the whole teacher body on labor issues. When the issue of bullying teachers becomes a labor conflict, then an adversarial teacher-administrator dynamic is set up. The labor group often then acts to protect the bullying teacher and does not take into consideration the impact that the bullying teacher has on the larger body of teachers.

Although the drama of the bully-victim interaction derives from overt violence of a verbal, ostracizing, and a physical nature, frequently what perpetuates power struggles in the school system is the bystanding observer (Twemlow 2000, Twemlow et al 2004). That is, the role of those teachers, students, support staff and parents who do nothing, ignore, or perhaps even enjoy the pain of those who are responding to the bullying.

In one example, a boy in the 8th grade was called every racial slur in the book while classmates stood by and laughed. After trying to enlist the help of a teacher, he commented, "People were laughing and it made me feel bad, but what really bothered me was when I told the teacher, he just said, 'Yeah, yeah.'" Teachers, who ignore such racial slurs or pass them off with a "whatever" as one student reported, are perceived by students as directly supporting the power struggles and bullying.

On the other hand, such teachers themselves may suffer severe stress and fear for their own safety in some inner city schools, if they take action. In such instances, if power dynamics are not dealt with, and if teachers bully students and students bully teachers, then effective discipline and classroom management become virtually impossible. For children to internalize control, discipline must be seen as fair and consistent. If excessive punishment and bullying by teachers is not dealt with, students will see teachers as adversaries, not as positive role models.

From our combined experience, several caveats developed:

1. Teachers are critical in determining the school climate. Thus, their attitudes to power dynamics are extremely relevant;
2. The scarce literature that exists is largely from the student's point of view, and although confirming that a relatively large proportion of teachers are highly coercive is not likely to be unbiased.

3. A better source of information is teachers themselves. This is the first, as far as we know, U.S. survey of teachers' perception of coerciveness in their colleagues.

Compared to the vast literature on bullying in schools, there is scarce literature on teachers as perpetrators of bullying. Similarly, victimization of teachers by students has long been recognized in the United States but rarely reported. The National Institute of Education, 1978, report showed a gradual increase in significant violence against teachers since the first survey in 1956, and by the time of the 1978 study, some 3% of teachers reported significant violence. Although we know of no more up-to-date surveys at the time of writing, this estimate is probably low. Bloch and Bloch, 1980, reported a study of 575 teachers whom the authors called "a new endangered species" suffering with a form of "combat neurosis."

The National Institute of Education, 1978, showed that male and female teachers are equally likely to be at risk. Large class sizes, low ability students, behavior problem students and minority youngsters are also more likely to be in classes where teachers are victimized. In one instance, a teacher was blamed after suffering a severe injury at the hands of a student for "not being able to relate well to minorities" (Bloch & Bloch, 1980). Even in the United Kingdom where bullying is more extensively reported in the literature, bullying of teachers by students and vice versa is seldom noted (Terry, 1998).

Buxton and Brichard (1973) surveyed 815 high school students of which 81% perceived teachers as violating student rights in a variety of areas, including disregard of student opinions, denial of restroom use, principals' vetoing reasonable ideas presented by student government and dress codes.

Terry (1998) investigated the abuse or bullying of teachers by students, questioning 101 teachers in 7 urban high schools in England. Although the focus of the article was on abuse of teachers by students, buried in it were some interesting figures relating to the abuse of students by teachers. In one question, teachers were asked if their actions might have been viewed as bullying by students. Some 57.7% reported that might be the case more for female teachers than male teachers. Teachers who had experienced bullying by students also tended to bully students. When asked whether they had seen bullying by other teachers, some 70% of the teachers reported seeing such bullying.

On the basis of the literature review we formulated a set of research questions to guide the construction of the research instrument. We were particularly concerned to establish that elementary school teachers knew of and recognized the problem of bullying teachers and the negative consequences associated with this attitude to relating to students. Along these lines we hypothesized:

1. There will be agreement concerning the qualities that make a bullying elementary school teacher.
2. There will be agreement concerning the perception of likely causes of teacher bullying.

3. The ability to recognize the problem of bullying will be a function of the teacher's personal history and particularly his or her personal experience of interpersonal dynamics characterized by power assertion with those experiencing more bullying in the past or currently being more likely to bully students.

Method and Sample

In the 1996-97 school year, 116 elementary school teachers from 7 urban U.S. elementary schools a representative sample of K through 5th grade teachers, completed a confidential and anonymous questionnaire entitled "A Survey on Bullying Teachers and Teacher Bullying", available on written request to the senior author. Of the teachers from these 7 schools, 57 provided completed questionnaires, but all 116 had sufficient numbers of responses to be useful in the analysis. A surprisingly high proportion (91.5%) decided to participate in the study. The schools were a convenience sample, volunteered by their principals, and participation within each school was entirely optional with questionnaires being distributed by research assistants to teacher mailboxes and then collected later from a common confidential drop box.

The teachers ranged in age from 22 to 64 years ($M=39.1$, $SD=9.9$), and in experience from first-year teachers to those with 37 years of experience ($M=13.3$, $SD=9.8$). The majority (62%) had taught in fewer than three schools. However, the number of schools taught in ranged up to 18 ($M=3.4$, $SD=2.7$) On average, the teachers had approximately 21 students in their classes with a standard deviation of 5.7. Of the

teachers surveyed, 12% were male, 77% were currently married, 4% were divorced, and the remainder were single.

The majority of teachers (80.7%) said that they were “satisfied” or “highly satisfied” with their jobs, 8.7% said they were “dissatisfied” or “highly dissatisfied,” and the remainder was undecided about their level of job satisfaction.

Three of the schools were predominantly white and in more affluent parts of town with traditional family structures, and four schools had predominantly minority children from lower socio-economic areas and single-parent families. Academic achievement scores for schools in the more affluent parts of town were higher than for the other schools, which also tended to have more out-of-school suspensions and a higher percentage of students on free or reduced-cost lunches. Many of the teachers had taught in a variety of schools, in both lower and upper socio-economic classes, and with mixed ethnic and family groupings.

For the survey questionnaire, the following definitions were used:

Bullying teacher was defined as a teacher who uses his/her power to punish, manipulate, or disparage a student beyond what would be a reasonable disciplinary procedure.

Bullying student was defined as a student who tends to control the classroom with disruptive behavior that implies contempt for the teacher and who uses coercive tactics to deskill the teacher.

Special effort was made to avoid embarrassment for teachers and to encourage collaboration and ensure confidentiality. The results were reviewed by the research committee of the school district to assure that the district would not be identifiable. Since we have worked in school districts throughout the United States of America and overseas, there was little risk of identification. To encourage a less defensive response in teachers, the questionnaire was framed in such a way that teachers' perceptions of what characterized bullying were the main focus. At the end of the questionnaire, specific information about their experiences of bullying were approached but worded in a way to indicate our awareness of the sensitive nature of the questions.

The specially constructed questionnaire consists of five sections. The first had 12 items collecting background information, including years of experience and satisfaction with teaching. The second section with 6 items attempted to establish the prevalence of bullying amongst teachers, including how much bullying teachers had observed, how many teachers they had worked with who bullied, and whether or not schools had a written procedures for handling problem teachers.

Two sections of the questionnaire attempted to establish if teachers had a consistent view of how bullying teachers behaved and differed from non-bullying teachers. The third section had 27 items to identify if teachers had a consistent image of bullying teachers. Teachers were asked from their own experience to rate how often a bullying teacher, as compared to a non-bullying teacher, might respond in a range of situations. Ratings were given twice on four-point Likert scales ranging from never to always.

Teachers first rated how often a bullying teacher might respond, followed by how often a non-bullying teacher might respond. The two ratings were subtracted from each other, producing difference scores. The consistency of these scores across subjects was considered to provide an indication of the agreement between teachers of the difference between bullying and non-bullying teachers. A further 16 items explored various behavioral descriptors of bullying teachers on a scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* statements such as “Bullying teachers use more suspensions.”

The fourth section of 11 items covered possible causes for bullying teachers ranging from psychiatric illness to being burned out, near retirement, insufficiently trained, etc. To explore the link between personal experiences of having been bullied and bullying students, the final section of the questionnaire asked teachers to rate on a scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, their “Personal Experience of Bullying.”. This section included seven items recording the teachers’ experience of bullying as a student, what their current experiences were of being bullied by students inside and outside of the classroom, and whether or not they had bullied a student themselves. The correlations reported are Spearman rank order correlations (r_s), a nonparametric version of the Pearson correlation coefficient, appropriate for ordinal or interval data that do not satisfy the normality assumption.

Results

Table 1 summarizes frequency data for some of the critical questions surveying teachers' perceptions of the incidence of other teachers who bully students.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE.

It should be noted that none of these data nor any of the demographic factors reported in the method section significantly discriminated self-reported bullying from non-bullying teacher perceptions.

When teachers were surveyed for their personal experience of bullying, some interesting results emerged suggesting that the teacher's personal experience of bullying is significantly correlated with their past experience of bullying and their tendency to bully students themselves. "Were you ever bullied when you were at school yourself?" correlates significantly with: "In your classroom, how many students try to bully you as the teacher?" ($r_s=0.34$, $p<0.01$, $n=91$); the likelihood of reporting that they, as teachers, had bullied students themselves ($r_s =0.32$, $p<0.01$, $n=75$); and the amount of bullying they receive in activities outside the classroom ($r_s =0.28$, $p<0.01$, $n=90$). Teachers who experienced more bullying as children may be more sensitive to bullying. They were significantly more likely to report that teachers bullied students ($r_s =0.29$, $p<0.01$, $n=93$), and reported knowing more bullying teachers in the past three years ($r_s =0.29$, $p<0.01$, $n=83$).

Teachers who tended to experience significant bullying in their classrooms also experienced bullying when performing other duties ($r_s =0.57$, $p<0.001$, $n=89$), but there

was no statistically significant indication that teachers who had these experiences would make any use of a special intervention to assist them in dealing with bullying students.

Teachers who scored high on number of times they have bullied a student themselves also showed significant correlations with being bullied at school when they were students ($r_s = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 75$), being bullied in classrooms by their own students ($r_s = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 76$), and being bullied while performing other duties ($r_s = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 75$).

Teachers who observed more bullying in the schools where they taught tended to also to report having been bullied more significantly as students themselves ($r_s = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 93$) and tended to have worked with more bullying teachers in the past 3 years ($r_s = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 89$). They were less likely to believe that teachers knew what to do when they witnessed bullying and did not think administrators were open to being told about bullying teachers ($r_s = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 97$ and $r_s = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 95$). In addition, they did not feel that principals did enough to stop teachers who bully students ($r_s = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 91$).

Teachers who observed more bullying were more likely to think that bullying teachers were burned out, untrained and envious of smart students ($r_s = 0.37$, $n = 95$, $r_s = 0.32$, $n = 94$, and $r_s = 0.27$, $n = 92$, $p < 0.01$), and were less likely to consider teachers who reported seeing other teachers bully students as not team players ($r_s = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 92$).

Teachers who feel that bullying behavior in teachers results from a lack of administrative support tend to see a host of causes for bullying. They see teacher bullies as untrained ($r_s = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 93$), and having classrooms that are too large ($r_s = 0.307$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 93$). They also are more likely to admit to bullying themselves ($r_s = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$, $n = 75$). .

These difference score were then factor-analyzed using a principal component analysis and were rotated using a VARIMAX procedure. The resulting scree plot, showed 2 factors which together accounted for 50% of the variance and are described in the results section (After VARIMAX rotation, factor, 1 accounted for 32% of the variance and factor 2 for 19%.) The factors were derived from the principle component factor analysis are shown in Table 2. The first factor could be interpreted as a **sadistic bully factor**. Bullying teachers on this factor were seen as humiliating students, hurting student's feelings and being spiteful. The second factor could be seen as a **bully-victim factor**. Bullying teachers from this perspective were seen as being frequently absent, failing to set limits and letting others handle problems.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Teachers who tend to see a lack of structure and a lack of leadership by example as central to what characterizes bullying teachers (those who score high on the second factor), feel that bullying teachers should be fired ($r_s = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 56$). Teachers who see a strong sadistic element as characterizing bullying teachers, (those who score

high on the first factor) do not feel that reporting teachers for bullying keeps one from being a team player ($r_s = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 57$), nor do they feel that corporal punishment is good ($r_s = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$, $n = 57$), or that teachers must dominate students to avoid being perceived as soft ($r_s = -0.50$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 57$).

Discussion

We were able to answer the question, do teachers recognize the problem, in the affirmative, but in the case of elementary schools, the majority of teachers, over 70%, felt such bullying was isolated and frequent in only about 18% of teachers. In comparison, Terry (1998) reported a much higher percentage, over 50%, of bullying teachers, but their study was in high schools.

Courageously, 45% of teachers admitted to having bullied a student. Some teachers reported being angry at being asked the question, but more reflective teachers realized that bullying is a hazard of teaching, and that all people bully at times and are victims and bystanders at times. The very openness of teachers by seeing and admitting to bullying suggests that efforts to prevent bullying might be effective, and thus, according to our theories, improve the learning climate, academic performance and feeling of safety for students. In contrast, few teachers neither made use of special interventions to assist them in dealing with bullying students nor supported the idea that such approaches might help. The teachers who reported such negativism also significantly reported having been bullied when they were students in school, were far

more likely to report seeing other teachers who bully, and reported themselves as being bullied both inside and outside the classroom. Such teachers, who were victims of traumatizing childhood bullying themselves, might deny that any such situation could be altered by an intervention since the role of victim is not an easy one to transcend without treatment, encourages denial, and is resistant to growth and development. Such victimized teachers felt that the school administration and principals were not open to being told about the problem and were not supportive enough.

Transgenerational transmission of abuse is frequently reported in the literature on violence in individuals and families. It is thus perhaps no surprise that teachers who experience bullying as a child, grow up to bully others, see more bullying around them, and experience more victimization. Our study did not show any gender difference, i.e., female teachers did not tend to become victims and males as perpetrators as the psychiatric literature suggests. We see bullying as an attitudinal characteristic derived from coercive power dynamics established in childhood, in family, and school environments leading individuals with experience of such power dynamics to be more likely to be trapped in bully-victim dynamics with changing victim and bully roles and more alert to bullying of others around them.

Certain teachers do attribute a consistent set of causes to bullying teachers: lack of administrative support, being untrained in discipline technique, dominating their students out of a fear of being hurt, too large classrooms, and being burned out, and envious of smarter students. Envy of smarter students seems surprising but has been

widely recognized in the early literature on education as part of a social condition called *ressentiment*, derived from Nietzsche's (1956) term reflecting a general envy and angriness, especially of others who seem smarter than oneself. Whereas Nietzsche saw it as a pervasive societal phenomenon, educators such as Nordstrom et al. (1968) see it as a significant problem in U.S. classrooms.

In our clinical study of children who bully other children (Twemlow, 2000), two prominent types described were: (a) the sadistic bully, a child with stable self-esteem, and little anxiety who bullies with pleasure, and (b) what we call the *bully-victim*, a type of child who provokes bullying and then acts in a victimized way after he/she is attacked, similar to Olweus' provocative victim (Olweus, 1992). The factor analysis of teacher responses revealed two similar types of bullying teachers, as perceived by other teachers in the study. Teachers observe a type of bullying teacher who is more bully type (the sadistic bully teacher) and a type of bullying teacher who is more like a victim (the bully-victim teacher). There is no doubt that there are some teachers who are not suited for teaching because of a sadistic tendency, but these are a tiny minority of those who devote themselves to the education of children. The bully-victim type of teacher is more likely to be amenable to retraining than the sadistic bully teacher, if there is validity in comparing these types of bullying behaviors with those in children.

Psychiatrists are well aware of the effects of chronic victimization on children's mental health and school performance. The serious and long term consequences of being victimized by peers include: increased anxiety, loneliness and self esteem issues, (Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995) ; poor academic achievement, (Olweus, 1991) ; peer

rejection, (Hodges, Malone & Perry, 1997), reduced numbers of friends and school avoidance; (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). This research adds another potential dimension to this etiological question, in the form of adult victimization of vulnerable children in a protected setting , where it is assumed that such problems will not usually occur.

There are methodological limitations to our study. The sample is a convenience one, and thus by not being random is subject to problems of generalization, although the response rate of teachers in participating schools was gratifyingly high. However, some questions were not answered by all teachers and the correlations reported are based on somewhat different samples according to the proportion of subjects willing to answer specific questions. The questionnaire was specially designed for the study and its psychometric properties, particularly, the validity of the scales used are unknown. Nevertheless, test-retest reliability of the instrument was established and was found to be surprisingly high. Although many teachers reported that taking the questionnaire was very helpful and a “wake-up” call for them, detailed qualitative information was not obtained from the teachers to flush out the raw figures.

Conclusions from the study are tentative only, since cause cannot be inferred from correlations and the questionnaire lacked thorough psychometric testing. Nonetheless, these findings represent an initial contribution in a very difficult area to study and suggest the need for replication to see if the relationships we found are consistent. The findings should be of interest to psychiatrists who consult with schools, school

administrators, educators, and teachers and others connected with maintaining and promoting academic excellence in schools.

Conclusion

. When a teacher is a bully and is having a negative effect on the environment, the entire work environment for the majority of the teachers is made needlessly hostile and vulnerable children suffer significant trauma, often with attendant learning and psychiatric problems. Non-bullying teachers' are often forced into an avoidant by standing role for fear of retaliation from unions, colleagues and conflicting loyalties.

Our work suggests that new approaches are needed to identify and respond to teacher bullying in schools. Since coercive power struggles spread through a school quickly, administrators, teachers and their labor groups need to work cooperatively to address this issue in a nonpunitive fashion that offers teachers the help they need to stop bullying., since punishment and labor action have failed to resolve the root of pathological power dynamics in the school. Psychiatrists with a psychodynamic orientation have much to offer resolution of these problems (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2001).

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TABLE 1

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF BULLYING TEACHERS

		Frequency	Percent
When you were in school, were you ever bullied?	Never	40	41.7
	Sometimes	55	57.4
	Often	1	1
	Total	96	100
In your classrooms, how many students try to bully you?	No students try to bully me	40	43
	One student	18	19.4
	A few students	35	37.6
	Total	93	100
Do teachers bully students?	Never	13	12
	Isolated cases	76	70.4
	Frequently	19	17.6
	Total	108	100
How Many Teachers have you known to bully students in the past school Year?	0	56	67.5
	1	13	15.7
	2	9	10.8
	3	3	3.6
	6	2	2.4
	Total	83	100
Does your school have a written procedure for handling "problem Teachers"?	No	16	15.8
	Yes	8	7.9
	Don't Know	77	76.2
	Total	100	100
Can you think of any times when you have bullied a student yourself?	No	46	59.7
	Once	6	7.8
	a few times	23	29.9
	Frequently	2	2.6
	Total	77	100

TABLE 2.

**ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX ON DIFFERENCE SCORES.
LOADINGS LESS THAN .5 SUPPRESSED**

Question	Sadistic Bully Factor	Bully-Victim Factor
Repeatedly Punishes Same Child	0.837	
Humiliates students to stop disruption	0.816	
Defensive about teaching style	0.790	
Spiteful to students	0.773	
Hurts Students' feelings	0.769	
Shuts down showoffs	0.765	
Puts Students Down to punish them	0.765	
Repeatedly Punishes Same Child	0.719	
Complains about work conditions	0.680	
Sets up Students to be bullied	0.665	
Makes fun of special ed. Students	0.616	
Uses Rejection to discipline	0.585	
Dislikes a lot of children	0.564	
Frequently suspends same child	0.532	
Frequently Absent		.738
Fails to set limits		.733
Lets others handle problems		.640
Doesn't like minorities	.526	.599
Allows themselves to be bullied		.592
Watches as Students Bully each other		.582
Needless physical Force		.578
Problems with discipline of BD Children		.571
Changes schools frequently		.568
Disorganized in School Emergencies		.527
Allows Disruption without intervening		.519

