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Can Schools Reduce Bullying? School Characteristics and the Prevalence of Bullying Behaviours

Bullying is a scourge on society, and being bullied in childhood correlates to depression, anxiety, relational difficulties, and low self-esteem in adulthood. In his article, originally published in the British *Journal of Educational Psychology*, researcher Daniel Muijs, considered how day-to-day school policies and practices relate to bullying in primary (elementary) schools in the UK. Muijs focused on school conditions (i.e. size), policies (i.e. behavioural policies), and processes (i.e. teaching quality) related to bullying prevalence in schools and examined them from an educational effectiveness framework, which relates to social and emotional development.

What is bullying?

In the mid 1990s, Dan Olweus, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Bergen in Norway, developed a widely accepted definition of bullying:

> *A student is being bullied or victimized when he/she is exposed, repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another.*

This definition emphasizes intentionality, which implies a power imbalance between the bully and their target, and can equally be applied to face-to-face bullying situations and to increasingly common forms of cyberbullying.

Factors in bullying: Peer presence and individual behaviour

Bullying is a social phenomenon that normally takes place in social situations. Even cyber is played out to an implicit and expected audience of peers. In fact, Muijs cited a study that showed that peers were present in 85 percent of bullying incidents.

If group norms matter, it follows that school and classroom culture may influence the prevalence of bullying behaviours by influencing the willingness of bystanders to intervene in the bullying situation.

Though peer presence and school culture may influence bullying, studies have shown individual personality traits that are related to bullying:
- social competence;
- externalizing behaviour;
- poorer psycho-social development;
- lack of self-esteem.

School factors related to bullying

School climate covers different aspects of the school environment, including physical aspects such as school size and state of the buildings, social aspects such as the quality of relationships between staff and students and the extent of competitive behaviour, and academic dimensions.

Some school factors appear to be more consistently related to bullying outcomes. A 2014 study found that there were less instances of bullying in classrooms where teachers directly intervened in bullying situations. Similarly, a 2013 study found factors that were significantly related to lower levels of bullying such as: policies for behaviour outside of the classroom (i.e. schoolyard fights), a parental and school partnership, and the quality of the school learning environment.

Educational effectiveness

One of the most influential current theories in educational effectiveness is the multilevel Dynamic Model of Educational Effectiveness (DMEE). This model describes how schools influence what teachers do, and in turn, how teachers influence pupils at the classroom level. School level factors provide conditions under which policies on teaching can be evaluated to create a positive learning environment in the school. However, this perspective has been criticized for a lack of non-cognitive outcomes, not related to curriculum subjects ("cognitive outcomes" - i.e. maths) but relate to broader aspects such as social and emotional development.

Findings

Children aged 10 – 11, from 35 English primary schools, with 54 percent female and 46 percent male students, and teachers and leaders from these schools were surveyed for this study. In terms of prevalence, 21 percent of the sample identified as being bullied, and 11 percent reported being the perpetrator of bullying.

The study did not find that school conditions (i.e. size or type) are significantly related to bullying, but that school policies are. All schools in England have bullying and behaviour policies, but the key is the quality of these policies in terms of implementation, evaluation, adaptation, and pupil and parental involvement.

Results show a substantial school and classroom-level effect on prevalence of bullying. Results from this study suggests evidence for the possibility that schools can affect non-cognitive outcomes, and specifically bullying, not just through targeted interventions, but through their day-to-day policies and practices, and thus provides a call-to-arms for educators and, not least, policymakers to continue to focus on pupil well-being as well as on high standards in cognitive attainment.

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Schools with a lower prevalence of bullying:

- Are more likely to keep records on bullying incidents during lessons and incidents outside of the school.

- Have more teachers and parents who understand bullying policies and pupils more likely to record incidents.

- More likely to organize professional development activities around combatting bullying.

- Talk to parents of bullies and bullied students.

- Are more likely to evaluate policies and their implementation more frequently.

- Report school-wide behaviour policies, systematically implemented and shared, including the teacher's role during break.

- Are more likely to have developed a code of behaviour with pupil input, and policies more likely to have been collaboratively developed and implemented.

- Create an environment with a strong and equal opportunity for social cohesion which may reflect the specific school culture and ethos.