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WHAT'S SCHOOL GOT TO DO WITH IT? CRITICALLY ADDRESSING THE SCHOOL IN SCHOOL BULLYING

Abstract: This theoretical article addresses the compound word *school bullying* by asking the question, 'what's *school* got to do with it?' Despite a vast amount of research into the phenomenon of school bullying, there has been relatively little focus on the importance of the school half of the open compound. Taking a critical educational perspective to school bullying (Horton, 2018), the article considers the importance of school to school bullying by discussing the social ecology of school and particularly the importance of the school environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In doing so, the article uses examples from a recently completed ethnographic research project conducted in Swedish schools to elucidate the importance of key features of schools (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson et al., 2002), the different layers of schools (Gordon & Lahelma, 1996), as well as the environmental and structural elements of schools (Zumbrunn et al., 2013). The article provides an empirically-based theoretical framework for critically addressing the school in school bullying and argues that school bullying cannot be adequately addressed by only focusing on the behavioural side of the open compound. School is not simply the setting for school bullying. School means more than that.

Keywords: school bullying, school, school-built environment, social ecology, critical educational perspective

Introduction

In this empirically-based theoretical article, I address the compound word *school bullying* and pose the Tina Turner inspired question, What's *school* got to do with it? In her hit song, What's love got to do with it? Tina Turner sings about trying, seemingly unsuccessfully, to avoid connecting the physical intimacy she feels to the emotion of love because of the potentially painful implications of doing so. In this article, I argue that it is not possible to adequately address the problem of school bullying by only focusing on the behavioural side of the compound and that attempts to do so will continue to be unsuccessful due to the power of school to influence the social relations that occur there. Acknowledging the importance of school has far-reaching implications, not only for how we understand and think about bullying, but also for how we address the problem and work towards reducing its prevalence and negative effects. Much like admitting deeper feelings of love, doing so may be uncomfortable,

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as it raises the stakes for those involved. As Rivers et al. (2007) point out, 'it places the burden of change upon the adults (teachers, administrators, and parents) and the institutions (the schools, the districts, and the boards of educations), rather than upon students' (p. 36).

Despite a vast amount of research into school bullying (Smith et al., 2021) and the promotion of whole-school and whole-education approaches (e.g., O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022), there has been relatively little consideration of the importance of the institutional school context to school bullying (Andrews & Chen, 2006; Francis et al., 2022a; Horton, 2018), beyond where school bullying most commonly occurs (e.g., Migliaccio et al., 2017; Vaillancourt et al., 2010), issues of school leadership (e.g., Purdy, 2021), school and classroom climate (e.g., Forsberg et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2018), and classroom management (e.g., Allen, 2010; Roland & Galloway, 2002). This is despite numerous researchers calling for more research into school factors throughout the years (e.g., Farrington, 1993; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Horton, 2021; Rivers et al., 2007; Yoneyama, 2015; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). More than 30 years ago, for example, Farrington (1993) wrote that, 'Further research should attempt to investigate school factors that are correlated with the prevalence of bullies and victims' (p. 402). Likewise, more than twenty years ago, Yoneyama and Naito (2003) stated that, 'Depite the fact that the school is the place where most bullying occurs, school factors that are correlated with the prevalence of bullying have been under-investigated' (p. 315). Rivers et al. (2007) point to the fact that school bullying continues to be a significant problem in schools despite the efforts of anti-bulying interventions, and suggest that it is necessary for a shift 'away from the person-centred focus to a more holistic or institutional level approach' (p. 35).

Yoneyama (2015) argues that a focus on the institutional contexts of schools would allow for a new frame of reference and provide the foundations for a new paradigm of school bullying research. In this article, I seek to contribute to the building of these foundations by critically addressing the school in school bullying. I take a critical educational perspective to school bullying (Horton, 2018), whereby I discuss the importance of more fully addressing the social-ecology of school bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and elucidate the importance of key features of schools (Duncan, 2013a; Eriksson et al., 2002), the different layers of schools (Gordon & Lahelma, 1996), as well as the environmental and structural elements of schools (Zumbrunn et al., 2013). As I will demonstrate, school is not simply the setting for school bullying. School means more than that.

While the article is theoretical in focus, it is empirically based on a recently completed social-ecological investigation of school bullying conducted at three elementary schools and one lower secondary school in Sweden. The study was ethnographic and involved participant observations of students' daily school life and semi-structured interviews with school staff and students from pre-school class up to grade eight (i.e., ages 5–15). Ethical approval (2018/284-31) was obtained from the regional ethical review board prior to conducting the research and all of the research participants, and the legal guardians of the participating students, provided informed consent. Participants were informed about the focus of the study, that their participation was voluntary, that they could choose not to answer questions if they did not want to, that the information they provided would be treated confidentially, and that they could rescind their consent at any stage during the study (for more information please see Forsberg et al., 2023, 2024; Horton et al., 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

A critical educational perspective on the social-ecology of school bullying

Numerous school bullying researchers have drawn inspiration from Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological developmental theory and taken a social-ecological perspective (e.g., Espelage et al., 2015; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Swearer et al., 2010). The social-ecological perspective incorporates not only the individual level and the social relations between individuals within particular settings (the *microsystem*), but also facilitates a consideration of the relations between different microsystems (the *mesosystem*), including those in which the individual is not actively involved (the *exosystem*), as well as broader societal values and norms (the *macrosystem*). Despite the possibilities of this theoretical framework (Thornberg, 2015), there has been a tendency to focus attention on social interactions at the microsystem level (Carrera et al., 2011) and to downplay the importance of the school environment (Horton, 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that 'behaviour evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment' and that it is therefore necessary 'to investigate the person *and* the environment, with special attention to the interaction between the two' (p. 16). Despite this, 'the relationship between various environments and bullying has not been extensively studied' (Andrews & Chen, 2006, p. 239). As Benbenishty and Astor (2005) point out, the school environment includes not only the social environment but also 'the physical environment' (p. 5). The physical environment not only influences opportunities for engagement, movement, and social interactions, but also how individuals understand their place within the physical and social environment (Sebba & Churchman, 1986).

In their heuristic model of school violence, Benbenishty and Astor (2005) place the school rather than the individual at the centre of the model and consider how school organisational variables relate to various forms of victimisation. A critical educational perspective on school bullying likewise places focus on the school context and considers how, for example, key school features, different layers of schools, and environmental and structural elements are connected to bullying. In the following section, I begin by focusing on some of the key features of schools.

The key features of schools

In a report for the Swedish National Agency for Education, Eriksson et al. (2002) ask what it is in the school itself that tends to trigger bullying situations, and point to four key characteristics of schools earlier outlined by Eriksson (2001). These include the fact that students cannot simply choose to leave school, that students are unable to choose their school- or classmates, that students spend a long time at school, and that their presence and number is arbitrary (Eriksson, 2001; Eriksson et al., 2002). In a similar way, Duncan (2013a, 2013b) highlights four key features of schools – *compulsion*, *compression*, *control*, and *competition* – which he argues 'work together synergistically but in a destructive way' (Duncan, 2013a, p. 41).

In our ethnographic research project, both students and teachers pointed to these features of schools when discussing bullying. While compulsion may be a positive feature of schools in terms of ensuring the rights of children to an education, it can also contribute negatively to the social situations of some students. In explaining why bullying occurs in schools, for example, a special education teacher answered, 'Well, you

have to be in school, and you don't choose which classmates you get, rather you get those you get, and you are part of that class.' In doing so, she pointed not only to the compulsory nature of schooling but also to the lack of choice regarding classmates. Compulsion and lack of choice may mean that some students are forced to remain in situations where they have little common ground with their peers, and that those who are subjected to bullying may get little respite or have little means to escape it. As Andrews and Chen (2006) argue, 'compulsory attendance at institutions, and their temporal and spatial structuring, both facilitates bullying and restricts a victim's ability to avoid it' (p. 246).

While school may provide a unique opportunity for students to meet and interact with same-age peers, the compression of large numbers of students into restricted spaces can negatively impact those interactions. Teachers and students in our project highlighted the issue of compression and illuminated the importance of the 'carrying capacity' of schools (Malone & Tranter, 2003, p. 117). Some of the teachers, for example, pointed to the increasing numbers of students in classrooms and suggested that it was increasingly difficult to cater to their social-emotional needs. This suggests a potential 'tipping point' whereby the compression of large numbers of students into classes becomes such that teachers are no longer able 'to communicate and build relationships with their students' (Yoneyema & Murphey, 2007, p. 11). Teachers also pointed to other areas of schools, such as playgrounds and cloakrooms, as insufficient for the large numbers of students using them and said that these spaces contributed to the creation of conflicts (Horton et al., 2020, 2023b). At one of the schools, for example, a teacher explained that the compressed nature of the cloakroom 'creates a lot of conflict because [the students] are on top of each other.' These findings echo findings from other studies that have pointed to the importance of having adequate space for the number of students using it. In an interview study of policymakers, school staff, parents and students conducted by Francis et al. (2022b) in Perth, Western Australia, for example, one of the policymakers stated, 'If you don't give [students] enough space, then they are going to fight … it can become bullying' (p. 7). Likewise, in an ethnographic study conducted by Mastour et al. (2023) at four schools in Cairo, Egypt, one of the school principals expressed, 'As long as there is a large number of students and a small space provided, there will always be an aggressive engagement between them, and consequently bullying will prevail' (p. 78).

While a certain degree of control is necessary for managing large numbers of students and preventing bullying situations, overly restrictive school environments may instead have an adverse effect on the behaviour of students and lead to feelings of disempowerment, resentment, irritation, and/or anger. Demonstrating the ways in which schools may be experienced as overly restrictive, a group of fifth grade boys in our study described the school in terms similar to those used by Yoneyama and Naito (2003) when depicting the Japanese classroom as a 'prison-like space' (p. 325) and Duncan (2013a) when describing 'the prison of schooling' (p. 35). One of the boys, for example, stated, 'it's like a prison here, exactly like a prison', while another said, 'it feels like you are just locked up. You can't even go to the toilet, you can't drink, you just have to sit and work, work, work, and think and think. Sometimes I just feel like this is really a prison.' Highlighting how such a restrictive environment can promote negative behaviour, one of the boys in the group, who had also been provided by peers and teachers as an example of a 'bully', suggested that he was subjected to 'too much pressure' at school and that this had negatively affected his emotions and ways of interact-

ing with some of his peers. In doing so, he suggested that bullying may be a 'stress-relieving strategy' (Yoneyama, 2001, p. 19) and pointed to the importance of the fourth characteristic of schooling put forward by Duncan (2013a): i.e., competition.

While competition may certainly be experienced positively by those students who succeed, and can help to develop certain skills and aptitudes, a focus on winning and being better than others can also negatively affect social relations and fuel bullying situations. As one teacher in our study explained, for example, 'There is a lot of competition between teams, and they are divided into teams, and they can easily complain that they have lost "because Kalle doesn't shoot well" or "you were so bad that we lost." It can become heated, and they can get very negative comments precisely because it is competitive all the time.' Jacobson (2010) argues that the competitive nature of schooling fuels the production of 'grids of hierarchy' through which students relate to one another in terms of how they 'stack up; the higher the better' (p. 49), for example according to how well they shoot or how good they are at particular sports. Strindberg and Horton (2022) point out that 'the importance of friendship is writ large in school contexts' (p. 253), as students are required to be at school for a long time and have no set role beyond being a student (Eriksson et al., 2002). This makes navigating these grids of hierarchy extra important for increasing students' sense of belonging (Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018), alleviating anxiety about potential social exclusion (Søndergaard, 2012) and reducing the risk of being singled out and subjected to bullying (Strindberg et al., 2020).

The different layers of schools

The above discussion alludes to the distinctions, disjunctures, and intersections between the different layers of schools. Gordon and Lahelma (1996) distinguish between three layers of schools, including the *official* layer of policies, curricula, and rules, the *physical* layer of school buildings, playgrounds, hallways, and so on, and the *informal* layer of social groupings, relations, and interactions. The key features of schools outlined above (i.e., compulsion, compression, control, and competition) are undergirded by official and physical layers, which together provide the contextual framework within which interactions at the informal layer of school are located. In our research, we explored the importance of the official and physical layers of schools by exploring how teachers understand the official terms used to legislate against bullying in Swedish schools (i.e., degrading treatment and harassment) (Horton et al., 2024), how teachers navigate juridical demands to report instances of degrading treatment and harassment in their day-to-day work (Horton et al., 2023a), and how the physical setting of the school impacts their anti-bullying work (Horton et al., 2020).

While the term bullying is no longer used in the Swedish Education Act or Swedish Discrimination Act, school staff in Sweden are legally obliged to report all instances of degrading treatment (i.e., behaviour that violates the dignity of a student) and harassment (i.e., degrading treatment connected to discriminatory grounds). Despite the removal of the term bullying from the aforementioned legal documents, our findings suggest that school staff tend to define degrading treatment and harassment in terms of bullying definitional criteria, such as intention, repetition, and imbalance of power, despite these criteria not applying to the terms degrading treatment and harassment (Horton et al., 2024). Teachers also constructed hierarchies between various

forms of behaviour as a means of navigating the demands for reporting, with certain incidents of harassment, occurring in the midst of a football match for example, being deemed less serious than other incidents (Horton et al., 2024). In attempting to navigate official reporting demands while dealing with negative social interactions within the informal layer of school, some of the teachers in our study deemed it necessary to make judgement calls. While some of these judgement calls were based on an interpretation of the seriousness of incidents, in terms of bullying definitional criteria, others were taken in an attempt to balance the juridical demands of reporting with the pedagogical demands of teaching and to negotiate the expectations of parents and the risks of being found not to have done the necessary juridical work. This meant that incidents involving students with seemingly more engaged parents might sometimes be taken more seriously than those involving students whose parents demonstrated little engagement (Horton et al., 2023a). These findings highlight how decisions taken at the legislative level impact the official layer of school and can negatively influence the ability and/or willingness of school staff to deal with negative social interactions within the informal layer of school.

Illustrating the ways in which the physical layer of school also impacts what occurs within the official and informal layers, teachers in our study stated that compressed schoolyards, corridors and cloakrooms, for example, contributed to conflicts and bullying, and that they were better able to identify bullying in smaller settings that were easier to observe. Similar findings were found by Fram and Dickmann (2012) in a study they conducted at an elementary school in the US, where the largeness of the playground exacerbated bullying problems at the school because of the difficulty of supervising it. Likewise, Mastour et al. (2023) found that the large size of one of the school playgrounds in their study made it difficult to supervise. Teachers in our study also expressed that certain school contexts demanded extra resources in terms of playground monitors, etc., due to the architectural challenges presented by areas that were less easily observable (Horton et al., 2020). In line with the argument put forward by Andrews and Chen (2006), some of the teachers pointed out that 'teachers cannot be everywhere' (p. 245). As Mastour et al. (2023) also argue, the architectural design of school buildings, the location of staff rooms, and the proximity of buildings to playgrounds (see also Fram & Dickmann, 2012) 'can all contribute to increasing or decreasing bullying' (p. 83). Such findings support the argument put forward by Gordon and Lahelma (1996) that the physical layer of school not only 'provides a context for school practices, but also shapes and is shaped by such practices' (p. 303).

The environmental and structural elements of schools

In further considering the importance of the physical layer of school to school bullying, it is necessary to return to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) call to investigate the interaction between the person and the environment, and to not only consider how physical space is impacted by interactions within the informal layer of school but also 'how physical space becomes social' (Gordon & Lahelma, 1996, p. 303). In doing so, it is useful to consider not only the physical environment, but also how that physical environment is structured and organised, and how that impacts the social interactions that take place within the informal layer of school. One way of doing this is to focus on the 'environmental-structural aspects of school life' (Nickerson et

al., 2014, p. 160) and distinguish between what Zumbrunn et al. (2013) term *environmental* and *structural* elements.

Environmental elements refer to the school-built environment in terms of the size of the space, noise levels, lighting, materiality, resource availability, and so on (Zumbrunn et al., 2013). A number of studies have, for example, pointed to the potentially negative impact of inadequate space (e.g., Francis et al., 2022b; Mastour et al., 2023), inadequate lighting (e.g., Fram & Dickmann, 2012; Francis et al., 2022b) and inadequate acoustics (e.g., Francis et al., 2022b; Horton & Forsberg, 2020) on bullying dynamics. When discussing environmental elements, it is thus useful to consider aspects of spatiality and materiality and how these relate to the official layer of school. As already noted, teachers and students in our study pointed to the lack of space in school in relation to the number of students compelled to be there (i.e., its compressed nature). Some students, however, also explained that the material design of spaces such as school changing rooms can contribute to bullying behaviour by making it possible, for example, to comment on each other's bodies (Forsberg et al., 2024). While Farmer et al. (2017) found that increasing the degree of risk and challenge on school playgrounds in New Zealand had little effect on student interactions, some of the students in our study raised the physical school environment's 'abrasive materiality' as a contributing factor in conflicts and their escalation (Forsberg et al., 2023, p. 190). For example, one boy explained that having football pitches made of abrasive materials such as concrete or gravel could mean that students who are pushed or tackled may hurt themselves more, and that this in turn could lead to more serious conflicts because of the 'fevered' emotions invoked (Forsberg et al., 2023, p. 191). Mastour et al. (2023) report a similar finding in their study, where a teacher at a school with a concrete football pitch, for example, stated that 'when a student hits or strikes down his colleague, serious injuries can be inflicted due to the nature of the cover' (p. 80).

Structural elements are related to the organisation of the school environment in terms of scheduling, school rules, classroom rules, etc. (Zumbrunn et al., 2013) This is not simply an issue of teacher knowledge, behaviour, or willingness. As Andrews and Chen (2006) point out, the ability of teachers to prevent and stop bullying is 'limited by the structuring of their time and space (timetabling) and broader policy' (p. 245). Students in our study, for example, highlighted how social interactions within certain spaces were influenced by the structuring of those spaces and how they were thus used. In terms of the football pitch, for example, the scheduling of breaktimes meant that large numbers of students were forced to share that compressed space at the same time and thus to compete for its usage (Forsberg et al., 2023). Likewise, scheduling impacted the ways in which the school changing rooms were used and thus the extent to which students were subjected to bodily exposure and the 'judging gazes' of others (Forsberg et al., 2024, p. 9). Our findings also highlight how the structuring of the school environment through scheduling and rules impacts the availability and use of resources such as footballs, swings, slides, blocks, and sticks, and how resource scarcity can lead to 'social skirmishes', which in turn can lead to more systematic bullying situations (Horton et al., 2023b, p. 468). As Sebba and Churchman (1986) have noted, competition for playground resources can lead to conflict situations and playground environments should thus be designed in such a way as to prioritise cooperation over competition and to minimise the extent to which students are in 'parallel situations' whereby they are competing for the same resources (p. 72).

Conclusions

In this empirically-based theoretical article, I have sought to critically address the school in school bullying in order to answer the Tina Turner inspired question, what's *school* got to do with it? The tendency for school to take a back seat when considering the compound word *school bullying* suggests that it is considered secondary to the behaviour of those involved. However, school is not simply the setting for school bullying. School means more than that, and it is therefore necessary to consider the role of school more thoroughly and investigate how schools may 'play a part in not only shaping bullying but perhaps even generating it, or at least providing conditions in which it can flourish' (Duncan, 2013b, p. 257).

As I have illustrated, the key features of schools are important for understanding why school bullying occurs, and these features are interconnected in various ways. For example, compulsion impacts compression by enforcing the presence of large numbers of students, which in turn impacts the perceived need to control their behaviour. Compulsion, compression and control also influence the degree to which students feel the need to compete with one another in terms of space, resources, friendships, and so on. As I have also shown, the key features of schools are undergirded by the official and physical layers of schools, which together constitute the contextual framework within which school bullying occurs and school staff are tasked with addressing the problem within the informal layer of school. Environmental elements of the physical layer, such as spatiality, materiality and resource availability, influence what occurs at both the official and informal layers of school. Structural elements, such as scheduling and rules decided and implemented at the official layer, influence how the physical layer is regulated and monitored, and interacted with(in) at the informal layer.

While there has certainly been plenty of focus on improving the school setting, through the encouragement of whole-school and whole-education approaches and improvements to school and classroom climates for example, there has been a relative lack of consideration of how the institutional school environment may be part of the problem. Moving the focus from the negative behaviour of individuals or groups of individuals to the institutional school environment, and the relations between the environment and those engaging with(in) it, raises uncomfortable questions about the possibility of 'bullying schooling' (Duncan, 2013b, p. 260). It also raises questions about the role of adults in the facilitation of school bullying through the enforcement of compulsory institutionalisation, the failure to build schools with adequate carrying capacity and less-abrasive materiality, the insufficient allocation of funding for the employment of school staff and the purchasing of resources, and so on.

Despite the difficult questions raised, it seems necessary to look beyond a simple acceptance of compulsory schooling, and to instead consider what school would look like if it was a place where compulsion was not necessary because it was somewhere students longed to be because of the sense of belonging, inclusion, community, enjoyment, and growth that it provided (Duncan, 2013a). As I have demonstrated, the problems of school are central to the problem of school bullying, and it is thus not enough to focus on the behavioural side of the compound word *school bullying*. Acknowledging this has important implications not only for how we understand school bullying, but also requires moving in a new direction and more thoroughly addressing the contextual nature of the issue.

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CO MA Z TYM WSPÓLNEGO SZKOŁA? KRYTYCZNA ANALIZA ROLI SZKOŁY W KONTEKŚCIE ZJAWISKA BULLYINGU

Abstrakt: W artykule podjęto temat złożonego zjawiska bullyingu – prześladowania i dręczenia szkolnego. Postawiono pytanie: „Co ma z tym wspólnego szkoła?" Pomimo licznych badań nad bullyingiem w szkole, stosunkowo niewiele uwagi poświęcono roli, jaką kontekst szkolny odgrywa w powstawaniu i utrzymywaniu bullyingu. Przyjmując krytyczną perspektywę edukacyjną (Horton, 2018), autor rozważa rolę szkoły w tym zjawisku, analizując społeczną ekologię, w szczególności złożone środowisko szkolne (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). W artykule wykorzystano przykłady z niedawno zakończonego etnograficznego projektu badawczego przeprowadzonego w szwedzkich szkołach, aby wyjaśnić znaczenie kluczowych cech szkół (Duncan, 2013; Eriksson i in., 2002), różnych warstw i poziomów w szkołach (Gordon, Lahelma, 1996), a także elementów środowiskowych i strukturalnych (Zumbrunn i in., 2013). Artykuł dostarcza teoretycznych ram opartych na badaniach empirycznych, które pozwalają na krytyczne ujęcie roli szkoły w zjawisku bullyingu. Argumentuje, że nie możemy skutecznie zapobiegać bullyingowi, skupiając się jedynie na behawioralnym aspekcie zjawiska. Szkoła to coś więcej niż tylko miejsce, w którym dochodzi do bullyingu – jej rola jest znacznie bardziej złożona.

Słowa kluczowe: bullying w szkole, kontekst szkoły, ekologia społeczna, krytyczna perspektywa edukacyjna