

Is Alternative Schooling Associated with Lower Bullying Incidence?

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Abstract

Bullying is a serious problem in mainstream public schools. One purpose of this article is to review the literature to investigate whether other types of schools, such as Steiner schools and Montessori schools, have a lower frequency of bullying than mainstream schools. Another purpose is to determine if bullying is a common factor leading to decisions to homeschool children. The article also includes a discussion of some lessons mainstream schools can learn from alternative schools about bullying prevention. There is evidence to suggest that bullying is more prevalent at mainstream schools, and bullying is a commonly cited reason to homeschool.

Keywords: bullying, Steiner, Montessori, homeschooling, LGBTQ, autism

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Introduction

Bullying in schools is a serious social problem. Bullying that occurs at least once a week can affect up to 32% of elementary and high school students (Plexousakis, Kourkoutas, Giovazolias, Chatira, & Nikolopoulos, 2019). Bullying is defined in many ways, and the United States Department of Education explains it thus: “Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated” (deLara, 2019).

Democratic and other types of alternative schools are designed to reduce or eliminate power differentials (openDemocracy, 2016), so it stands to reason that the incidence of bullying at these schools might be lower than at traditional schools. Most democratic schools have clear mechanisms to address any bullying concerns before they become serious problems, such as discussions at community meetings. One goal of this paper is to investigate whether alternative schools indeed have fewer problems with bullying than traditional public schools, as might be expected. Steiner schools, Montessori schools, and other forms of alternative schooling will be discussed. Furthermore, I am interested in discovering if bullying is an important factor behind decisions to switch from traditional schooling to homeschooling. I will focus on the experiences of members of the LGBTQ community and autistic individuals. Finally, I will discuss some of the long-term consequences of bullying, and some of the lessons that traditional schools can learn about bullying prevention from democratic and alternative schools.

Bullying in Traditional Schools

Research shows that classrooms with distinct hierarchies are associated with bullying behaviour, where certain students have higher peer status (popularity) and more decision-making

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power than other students (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). In fact, bullying behaviour seems to increase over time in hierarchical classrooms. The correlation between individual student risk factors for victimization (such as social anxiety and peer rejection) and bullying incidence varies greatly between classrooms, which suggests that classroom context can encourage victimization to take place.

Baker (1998) reports that violent acts, such as bullying, take place more often in schools that lack a sense of community. When schools fail to provide opportunities for students to develop positive relational bonds with their peers, they are responsible for perpetuating bullying and other forms of violence. Conversely, students who feel they are part of a peaceful community are less prone to act aggressively. Baker (1998) suggests that students feel a stronger sense of community when they are given an active role in helping set the rules of the classroom in a democratic manner.

Steiner Schools

There have only been a small number of studies that directly compare bullying incidence at traditional versus alternative schools. One such study examined the experiences of 84 students at a Steiner school in England (Rivers & Soutter, 1996). An important part of the ethos of Steiner schools is developing a sense of community in which “teachers and pupils are united against the materialism of the dominant culture” (Rivers & Soutter, 1996, p. 361). There is no staff hierarchy at Steiner school, and all teachers run the school together. All staff are paid the same amount, including secretarial staff, groundskeepers, etc. Students learn to see themselves as part of a classroom community and stay with the same teacher and classmates for eight years until they enter the upper school. Over the course of these eight years, students will likely have many interpersonal difficulties with their peers and teacher and will develop strategies to manage

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conflicts, thereby learning that relationships cannot be abandoned due to occasional disagreement.

The curriculum at Steiner schools is suffused with moral lessons that teach children the value of cooperation and sharing. Stories are an important part of lessons across all subjects. For example, in mathematics, students learn about the concept of division through the story of a farmer who grows many bushels of wheat, which is then harvested with the help of family and friends. The wheat is brought to the barn and shared equally amongst all those who contributed to the harvest. Whenever children see the division sign, they are reminded of this story. Division is taught before addition at Steiner schools to emphasize that sharing is more important than accumulation.

If it is true that bullying incidence is related to school ethos rather than individual personality characteristics, one would expect bullying to decrease as students switch to a Steiner school, which has a non-competitive ethos and a welcoming environment. The study conducted by Rivers and Soutter (1996) asked students to talk about any bullying they had seen or experienced during that term. Out of the 84 students interviewed, 10 boys and 4 girls answered “yes” when asked if they had been bullied this term. This works out to almost 17%, less than the 32% figure reported using public school data. 13 of these 14 students said they were bullied “sometimes” or “only once or twice.” Also, there was zero reporting of any physical bullying taking place. However, students reported a significant amount of “in good fun” teasing, which the authors hypothesize is an attempt to increase group cohesion and conformity. The students viewed teasing as less malicious than bullying, but still hurtful. Almost all students reported that they liked going to school, and there was almost no evidence of absenteeism. None of the students considered themselves to be “unpopular,” even those who had reported being bullied.

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This study supports the theory that democratic schools have a lower incidence of bullying than traditional public schools.

Montessori Schools

There have been at least two PhD dissertations that focused on bullying incidence in Montessori schools. Montessori schools believe in having a peaceful environment for students to grow and develop (Flower, 2006). A sense of community and belongingness characterized by positivity and cooperation helps define the Montessori ethos. These schools are more democratic than traditional schools due to the Montessori philosophy that students should play a key role in how the classroom is run. Students hold class meetings which give them a chance to voice their concerns on community-selected topics. Unlike in public schools, students in Montessori classrooms are free to speak with each other at any time and work together on whatever activities they would like. There are no teacher-created competitions, rewards or punishments. Since there is no drive to compete, Montessori students develop a desire to help each other.

Rigaud (2013) conducted a study that included all 150 Montessori “lower elementary schools” in the United States (grades 1-3), and collected data using online surveys, focus groups, and interviews. The survey data revealed that bullying occurs only rarely in Montessori lower elementary classrooms, and that Montessori teachers are successful at creating peaceful classroom environments. Flower (2006) examined the incidence of bullying in grades 4-6 at both a Montessori school and a traditional public school in Cincinnati. About 200 students took part in this study. It was found that there was significantly less physical and verbal bullying at the Montessori school than at the traditional school. Also, students at the Montessori school reported a significantly more positive school climate. These studies seem to support the notion that the student-centred pedagogy and warm school climate at Montessori schools led to an overall

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reduction in bullying incidence, as students learn to build positive relationships with their peers.

Other Alternative Schools

There have been many newspaper and magazine articles written about the incidence of bullying in alternative and democratic schools. Neustatter (2011) describes the experience of a Summerhill alumnus who recounted that bullying was not very commonplace at the school. Luu (2015) describes how students at the Sudbury Valley school do not compete for grades, which allows for a learning environment based around co-operation where children learn to treat others with respect. Peter Hartkamp, a founder of three democratic schools in The Netherlands, states that he has not seen any bullying take place at democratic schools (openDemocracy, 2016). Gray (2010) believes that the one-person-one-vote system at democratic schools is highly effective at preventing any serious incidents of bullying from taking place.

Homeschooling

Is bullying a common motivator for families to make the decision to homeschool? Many homeschooling proponents believe that traditional schooling does not socialize children in a healthy manner, as they are exposed to many negative influences such as peer pressure and bullying (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). In one study, 78.7% of homeschooling parents in Minnesota said concerns about the school environment, including safety, drugs, and bullying were either “important” or “extremely important” factors in their decision to homeschool, with 12.3% listing it as their top reason (Smetak, 2019). Per Brown, Aalsma, and Ott (2013), in a phenomenological study of 11 parents with middle-school children who were victims of bullying, 10 parents said that the administration at their child’s school took no further action to prevent subsequent acts of bullying from taking place. This led parents to feel helpless and insignificant. Many believed they had no choice but to remove their children from the school,

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and either begin to homeschool or send their child to a new school.

LGBTQ Individuals and Homeschooling

A study looked at the reasons individuals who identify as LGBTQ decide to homeschool or unschool, and their experiences (Riley, 2018). According to this study, 82% of LGBTQ individuals between the ages of 13 and 20 have been verbally harassed in an educational environment, and 38% have been physically harassed. Idzie Desmarais, a well-known LGBTQ advocate in homeschooling circles, believes that around 20% of individuals in the unschooling community identify as LGBTQ. These students are much more likely to be bullied and ostracized at school than their straight and cisgender peers. Therefore, they are more likely to be pulled out of the traditional school system and unschooled or homeschooled, per Desmarais.

Riley (2018) interviewed 17 LGBTQ individuals who homeschooled or unschooled. Most participants said their sexual or gender identity was not the primary reason they chose to homeschool. However, one participant noted that they avoided a lot of social stigma and bullying by being homeschooled. Another participant believed that if they had stayed in public school as a teenager, they would have remained in denial about their sexual identity as a coping mechanism. One homeschooler took some online courses where it was easier to connect with other queer teenagers, allowing them to experience positive associations with queerness daily. This individual suggested that school has an associated “straight culture” and that those who did not belong to this culture would be ostracized. If they had remained at a public school, they would have experienced more negative imagery associated with queerness, making it difficult to feel comfortable with their identity. In other words, homeschooling provides freedom from having to worry about conformity and peer pressure as other young people do.

Four out of 17 participants in Riley’s (2018) study mentioned that the bullying they

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experienced at school was not eliminated when they switched to homeschooling. These four individuals experienced bullying within their community groups. For example, one individual was part of a fundamentalist Christian community that held negative views on LGBTQ identities. Bullying is not just a school-based issue and can occur anywhere groups can exclude and isolate individuals rather than accept them for who they are. One participant pointed out that if an individual decides to homeschool, it is crucial that they find a “subculture” where they will be treated with dignity and respect.

Autistic Individuals and Homeschooling

There has been a lot of discussion recently about whether to use identity-first or person-first language when writing about individuals on the autism spectrum (Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson, & Hand, 2021). Identity-first language is associated with the growing neurodiversity movement and a correlation has been demonstrated between use of identity-first language and acceptance and positive feelings toward autism. Person-first language is potentially ableist when referring to autism, where ableism is defined as the assumption that disabled people are inferior to nondisabled people. Many people within the autistic community reject person-first language. For example, autistic adults in the United Kingdom prefer “autistic person” over “person with autism”. Similar results were found from samples of autistic individuals in Australia. Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) recommend that journals should not require the use of person-first language when writing about autism, and thus I have chosen to use identity-first language.

O’Hagan, Bond, and Hebron (2021) performed a review of the literature on the reasons that families with autistic children decide to switch from mainstream schooling to homeschooling. Despite the good intentions behind inclusive education, educators often still

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struggle to effectively meet the needs of autistic children in traditional classrooms. It was found that autistic students who attend traditional schools experience greater social anxiety than those individuals who attend alternative schools. Many parents feel they have no choice but to withdraw their children from the public-school system to be home educated due to the challenges they face and the impact of traditional schooling on the mental health of their children.

In their thematic synthesis review, O'Hagan, Bond, and Hebron (2021) identified bullying as one of the five main reasons parents decide to homeschool their autistic children. Bullying is a well-established risk factor for autistic children in the traditional school system. Reasons that autistic students are vulnerable to bullying include communication difficulties and a lack of friendships (which usually serve as a protective factor against bullying). In one study, it was found that six out of ten mothers reported that their autistic child was being bullied at school. Another study found that high school is a greater risk factor for bullying than elementary school for autistic children because the social relationships become more complex.

A study conducted by Bower (2019) found that bullying was the main reason that parents decided to homeschool their autistic child. This study focused on an eight-year-old, Toby, with same-sex parents in Northern Ireland. Toby's parents believed that he was bullied partly because of his difficulties with socializing, and partly due to differences in his family situation. The school did not attempt to teach him how to build relationships and feel included in school events and games. Therefore, Toby was unable to make friends, and he believed that none of his peers liked him. After a lengthy battle with the school to support their son's socialization needs, Toby's parents ultimately decided that homeschooling was their only option. Once the switch to homeschooling was made, and his socioemotional needs were properly addressed, Toby's parents reported that he began to thrive.

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O'Hagan, Bond, and Hebron (2021) found dramatic benefits when autistic children were taken out of the mainstream school system to be homeschooled. Family relationships were strengthened. Social, emotional and mental health for autistic children improved in all the studies included in this synthesis review. Autistic children no longer reported high levels of stress and anxiety, their social skills improved, and overall were found to be happy and flourishing. There is also evidence that homeschooling prepares autistic children well for higher education and encourages them to love learning and pursue their own special interests.

Long-Term Consequences of Bullying

The consequences of childhood bullying can be dire and are only beginning to be truly understood. Individuals who were victims of bullying as children often experience lifelong impairment to their mental and physical well-being (deLara, 2019). In the study conducted by deLara (2019), almost all participants felt that the helplessness they experienced as bullying victims led to a lifelong lack of trust in other people. As a result, they often had difficulty forming healthy relationships as young adults and contributing to their communities. Many individuals began to avoid social contact or stayed in abusive relationships. Children who are socially marginalized often remain “loners” in adult life. Female victims of bullying are almost four times more likely to develop a Personality Disorder (especially Borderline Personality Disorder) as adults when compared to children who were not bullying victims (Antila, Arola, Hakko, Riala, Riipinen, & Kantojärvi, 2017).

Bullying can affect the functioning of the body's endocrine system. In the short-term, the stress caused by bullying victimization results in an increase of the hormone cortisol in the bloodstream, which is associated with the “fight or flight” response (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). However, long-term bullying leads to a reduction in

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the body's cortisol response. This blunted cortisol response is closely associated with PTSD and results in a weakened ability to self-regulate and deal with stressful situations. Prolonged stress from bullying disrupts the daily circadian pattern of cortisol release, which affects sleep patterns, causing further problems with emotional regulation, and a heightened detection of social threats (in other words, becoming hypervigilant to hostile cues). Lower cortisol response due to chronic bullying can lead to what Wehrenberg and Prinz (2007) call "the birth of the anxious brain." In other words, childhood bullying victimization can potentially lead to a lifelong anxiety disorder.

Bullying Prevention in Traditional Schools

The participants in deLara's (2019) study commented on their disappointment that the adults at their schools did not do more to prevent bullying. There have been relatively few randomized control trials conducted to research the effectiveness of bullying prevention programs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Per Menesini and Salmivalli (2017), many antibullying programs did not lead to positive outcomes, others have not been evaluated, and some were only evaluated poorly, and therefore no conclusions can be drawn about them. Up to 45% of all bullying intervention programs in one meta-analysis described by Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) demonstrated no reduction in bullying incidence at all.

One potentially effective path toward bullying reduction is using empathy training to build social-emotional intelligence. The competitive nature of traditional schooling is antithetical to empathy development, so this skill must be directly taught at an early age, while simultaneously decreasing the emphasis schools place on academic and other forms of competition. Per Shetgiri (2013), social skills group training is much more effective for younger elementary students than older children or teenagers.

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When antibullying programmes demonstrate positive effects, they are always intensive and long-lasting (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). In the past, much anti-bullying work has focused on trying to change the personalities of bullies, and has not been successful (Flower, 2006). From the research discussed in this report, it seems the best way to reduce the incidence of bullying in traditional schools is to focus on creating a warm educational climate with democratically run classrooms, where all students are treated equally and competition for status and power is eliminated.

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