

Teaching practices could play an important role in preventing bullying

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Classrooms that encourage competition between students may inadvertently be creating settings where bullying is more likely to take place. That's one of the conclusions that can be drawn from work led by McGill University researchers Maria Di Stasio and Robert Savage, who recently published a paper on the subject in the *Journal of Adolescence*. But it's only part of the story.

Di Stasio's research in [bullying](#) grew out of her 10 years as a substitute [teacher](#) working in junior high schools in the Montreal area. She saw a lot of bullying and victimization during that time. What surprised her, however, was that the incidence differed markedly across classrooms, even within the same school: in some classrooms bullying was evident, while in others it was not. Curious as to why this might be, she decided to pursue the question for her PhD research at McGill's Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology.

Reading marks aloud in class affects atmosphere

After conducting surveys with close to 700 Montreal-area students in grades 7 and 8, and by building on earlier research in the field, she now understands a lot more about some of the factors that play into bullying. Prior research suggests that junior high school is a time when students compare themselves with their peers more than they do in elementary school, one of the factors that potentially contributes to bullying and victimization.

"There seems to be a correlation with a greater degree of bullying and victimization in classrooms that encourage competition, where teachers do things like read the marks aloud so that students can compare themselves with their peers," says Di Stasio, who is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alberta. "When students work together on group projects and collaborate on classwork, this seems to be less associated with outcomes of bullying and victimization."

For boys, relationship with teacher crucial

"One factor that was important, especially for boys, was the quality of the relationships they had with their teachers in the [classroom](#)," Di Stasio says. "The more they felt they were listened to, or that the teacher found ways to consider their interests, the less bullying and victimization the students reported in the classrooms."

Because little research has been done on how gender and bullying are related to classroom characteristics such as competition and social comparison, more work needs to be done before firm conclusions can be reached in this area, the researchers caution.

Even so, Prof. Savage says, the findings from this study "could help guide the development of teacher-training programs that focus on school-wide systems that help the building of strong relationships between teachers and students, particularly boys, to help prevent bullying and victimization."

More information: Maria Rosaria Di Stasio et al. Social comparison, competition and teacher–student relationships in junior high school classrooms predicts bullying and victimization, *Journal of Adolescence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.10.002)

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