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Exploring pupils' perspectives on school climate

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ABSTRACT

Background: School climate is crucial: its character can affect pupils' academic achievement, teachers' working conditions and the wellbeing of everyone at school. A major concern for teachers is how to prevent and manage disruptive behaviours. Against this backdrop, there is a need for thorough investigation of pupils' perspectives to better understand their perceptions of the climate at their schools and their views about why disruptive behaviours occur.

Purpose: In this small-scale, qualitative study, we aimed to contribute to the body of school climate research by exploring pupils' perspectives on school climate, teachers and relationships at school.

Method: We conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis, exploring pupils' perspectives on these issues through focus group interviews. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted (n = 104) with grade 1–9 (7- to 15-year-old) pupils from a school in Sweden. The interview guide included questions about sense of safety, relationships at school and in classrooms, and pupils' views of teachers. Constructivist grounded theory was used as the analytical framework.

Findings: A recurrent pattern identified in the data was the focus on disruptive behaviours and how these were connected to the pupils' learning environment, sense of safety and teachers. Three core categories were conceptualised from the pupils' perspectives: (a) within-pupil explanations, (b) teaching style explanations and (c) peer group process explanations. We adopted a social-ecological approach to conceptualise the complexities and interplay of factors addressed by the pupils in their perspectives on disruptive behaviours.

Conclusions: Our findings provide insight into the way that different factors interplay in the emergence of disruptive behaviours in the classroom, nested within both contextual and structural aspects. This analysis of pupil perspectives also points to the importance of a whole-school approach in which teachers establish a warm, responsive and confident teaching style in the classroom and in the playground to influence the social dynamics.

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Introduction

School climate refers to 'the quality and character of school life' (NSCC 2021), including 'shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between the students,

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teachers, and administrators' (Mitchell, Bradshaw, and Leaf 2010, 272). It represents the quality of teacher–pupil and pupil–pupil relationships, order/rules/discipline, sense of school safety and school belongingness for the whole school. Classroom climate can be defined as 'the sum of all the group processes that take place during teacher–student and student–student interactions' (Zedan 2010, 76) and includes interpersonal relationships, classroom rules and levels of teacher control. Whereas the school climate is the overall climate of the school (school level), the classroom climate is a part of the school climate that varies across classrooms (classroom level). A positive, warm and supportive school climate is associated with greater academic achievement, fewer disruptive behaviours and less bullying (Thapa, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro 2013; Wang and Holcombe 2010). By contrast, a negative school climate is associated with being non-supportive and having more disruptive behaviours and bullying both in the classroom and elsewhere in the school, affecting students' sense of safety and learning (Lleras 2008). Studies also reveal that a positive school climate is linked with higher levels of work satisfaction and less burnout among teachers (Aloe et al. 2014; Malinen and Savolainen 2016), and with pupils' wellbeing at school (Aldridge et al. 2016; Aldridge and McChesney 2018; Thapa et al. 2013).

To promote a positive school climate, research suggests that teachers should establish and maintain warm, caring and supportive relationships with pupils (Lei, Cui, and Chiu 2016; Roorda et al. 2017; Shin and Ryan 2017; Quin 2017), along with high levels of expectation, demandingness and control (i.e. structure) in the classroom and in their interactions with pupils at school (Huang and Cornell 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, and Jungert 2018). One of the main concerns for teachers is how to prevent and manage disruptive behaviours (Aldrup et al. 2018; McCormick and Barnett 2011; Tanase 2019) that 'disrupt the teaching–learning process or interfere with the orderly operation of the classroom' (Aloe et al. 2014, 32). Such behaviours include being late, being off-task, moving around in the classroom or being disrespectful to the teacher (Aloe et al. 2014). To help teachers prevent and manage disruptive behaviours, an increased understanding of why pupils misbehave is crucial. Research shows multiple and highly complex reasons why misbehaviours occur, including pupils lacking skills and seeking power or attention (Tanase 2019), peer group processes and the school curriculum (Reichenberg 2018), and pupils' lack of influence and their perception of certain rules, behavioural management and discipline as unfair and inconsistent (Thornberg 2008). Other aspects include school-level factors such as school size (Lleras 2008; Thapa et al. 2013) and organisation (Tanase 2019), and out-of-school factors such as the neighbourhood (Lleras 2008).

Within school climate research, there is a need for more qualitative research (Thapa et al. 2013). In particular, there is a gap regarding studies about pupils' perspectives on school climate. This includes how pupils understand their school climate, which views on aspects relating to the school climate they take into account, which social processes they highlight when asked to describe how they perceive the climate at their schools or what views they may hold on why disruptive behaviours occur. In previous studies, pupils have been asked to describe how they perceive their schooling (Strikwerda-Brown et al. 2008), what characterises good versus bad teachers (Raufelder et al. 2016) and how aspects of the school connect to their wellbeing (Newland et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2018). Pupils emphasise the importance of (1) the quality of the teacher–pupil

relationship, (2) teaching expertise and (3) the teacher's personal characteristics (Raufelder et al. 2016). According to pupils, a good school is equated with good teachers (Strikwerda-Brown et al. 2008), and pupils' wellbeing at school is also interconnected with their social relationships with teachers and peers (Powell et al. 2018). In all, it is evident that pupils emphasise the school climate and their relationships within school as being important for their wellbeing (Aldridge et al. 2016; Newland et al. 2019). Differences between schools and classes are connected with school climate. This means that we can expect to find differences in the perceptions of school climate between schools, as the interpersonal relations will vary. Hence, school climate matters: it is crucial to gain better understanding of how pupils perceive their school climate and which aspects they highlight as important. School climate is a complex concept that has considerable influence on many aspects of school life: it can affect pupils' academic achievement, teachers' working conditions and the wellbeing of everyone at the school.

Background

A social-ecological perspective on school climate

From a social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979), school climate and its associated processes can be understood as influenced by the way in which they are nested within different school systems, such as peer processes, relationships between teachers and pupils, relationships among teachers, and aspects outside the immediate context that affect these social processes. A social-ecological perspective views several factors as interconnected in shaping the immediate environment of developing individuals (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979). It uses an environmental-structural approach to understand human development, highlighting how a complex set of relations between four different systems affects the social processes and the individuals that inhabit a certain context. These four different systems are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979). The microsystem refers to the immediate setting: for example, a school class, and focuses on the 'pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 22). The mesosystem refers to the interrelations between microsystems and emerges whenever the developing person moves into a new setting. While Bronfenbrenner (1979) exemplified mesosystems as the interaction between home and school, for example, it is argued elsewhere (Horton and Forsberg 2020) that interrelations between different settings within the school, such as the classroom level and the playground, might be just as important to explore. The next system is the exosystem, referred to as settings that do not involve 'the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 25). This might refer to 'activities of the local school board' (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 25). Finally, there is the macrosystem, which affects all the other systems and relates to social, cultural, political and economic aspects, as well as different dominant norms such as gender norms, cultural norms and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Purpose

In this study, we aimed to contribute to school climate research by exploring pupils' perspectives on school climate and identifying which social processes they highlighted as crucial. We undertook this through an in-depth qualitative analysis, guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach that explored social processes and the main concern(s) of the participants. To conceptualise the complexities and interplay of factors addressed by the pupils in their perspectives on school climate, we adopted a social-ecological approach.

Method

Ethical considerations

In this study, we focus on pupils' perspectives on school climate, teachers and relationships within school. In line with Swedish research ethics (Swedish Research Council 2017), all pupils and guardians were informed about the project and written consent letters were obtained from both pupils and guardians. Pupils were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw their participation at any time without any negative consequences and that the information they provided would be confidential and anonymised when reported. Prior to all data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the local ethical review board.

Data collection

In this study, 18 semi-structured focus group interviews (n = 104 participants) were conducted with pupils from a school in a rural location in Sweden. The participating pupils came from the first to ninth grades in the school (i.e. 7- to 15-year-olds). Around two-thirds of pupils at the school had highly educated parents (i.e. post-secondary education level), which is comparable to the national average for Sweden. In grades 1–9, roughly one-tenth of pupils was either born in another country or both their parents were born in another country, which is lower than the national average (26%). In each grade, a group of boys and a group of girls were recruited through a random sampling procedure (51 boys; 53 girls). There were six participants in each group, except for three of the groups – boys grade 5 (n = 5); boys grade 3 (n = 4); and girls grade 1 (n = 5) – where absence meant there were fewer pupils per group. A semi-structured interview guide, in Swedish, was used throughout the interviews. It included questions such as 'How do you perceive the social climate?', 'How do you perceive your teachers?' and 'How do you perceive your breaktimes?'. Alongside this, a probing technique was used to explore the participants' perspectives further. During the interviews, no predetermined definitions of concepts such as school climate or disruptive behaviour were provided to the pupils; rather, researchers asked broad questions so that the collection of data was shaped by the concepts and aspects that the pupils themselves addressed. All focus group interviews were carried out in Swedish. They took place in assigned rooms at the school, with only the researcher and the group present. Each interview ranged between 30 and 60 minutes in duration and interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

A constructivist grounded theory approach guided the data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2014), in which the focus was on exploring how the pupils make sense of their social worlds and which meanings and processes they articulate. As explained above, during the focus group interviews we were guided by the concepts and aspects that the pupils themselves chose to focus on: this, in turn, guided our further analysis based on what we interpreted as the pupils' main concern(s). The pupils' perspectives and voices were, thus, viewed as co-constructed through interaction among the pupils, and between them and the researcher (Charmaz 2014). The research team collaborated when analysing the data by comparing and discussing the constructed codes throughout the research process. In our analysis, we adopted initial, focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2014). The initial coding focused on summarising the data line by line and comparing the codes with each other; in the focused coding, we used the most commonly recurring and comprehensive codes to compare against the data, developing these into concepts. During initial coding, we identified that a recurring pattern emerging from the analysis was the pupils' focus on what they perceived to be disruptive behaviours. According to the pupils' narratives and accounts, behaviours that were referred to as disruptive included: talking out loud, crawling on the floor, moving around the classroom and arguing with the teacher. Our coding revealed how pupils perceived these behaviours to be displayed in the classroom during lessons, and the consequences that the behaviours had for pupils, such as affecting their ability to remain focused on tasks. These disruptive behaviours also seemed to be associated with several codes, including pupils' sense of safety, their learning environment, their teachers and specific individuals. It was clear that the pupils viewed disruptive behaviours as problematic and wanted such behaviours to be dealt with.

During focused coding, we used the most frequently occurring and comprehensive codes to compare against the data. This process indicated how disruptive behaviours in the classroom were connected to social processes and behaviours in different settings at the school, and how these behaviours affected the ways that pupils perceived their school climate, referring to the social climate in both the classroom (i.e. the classroom climate) and the playground. Through theoretical coding, the relationships between our focused concepts grounded in the focus group data were explored (Charmaz 2014). In the coding process, we adopted a social-ecological perspective in order to conceptualise the complexities and interplay of factors addressed by the pupils.

Findings

Through our analysis of the focus group interview data, three core categories were constructed. These categories indicated the different ways in which pupils explained, from their own perspectives, the emergence of disruptive behaviours in school: (a) within-pupil explanations, (b) teaching style explanations and (c) peer group process explanations. According to our analysis, there seemed to be an interplay between these factors in the emergence of disruptive behaviours in the classroom. From the social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979) that we adopted in this study, we understood the emergence of disruptive behaviours as nested within different systems, affecting the

immediate classroom situation (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979) and how pupils perceive their school climate. In the subsections below, we present our main findings according to three core categories that were constructed. Where appropriate to illuminate and illustrate points, selected and anonymised translated excerpts from the focus group interview data have been included.

(a) Within-pupil explanations

When pupils talked about disruptions, they commonly viewed these behaviours as occurring because of certain pupils that they cited, especially boys, in their class. As one boy in grade 2 put it: 'They run around the classroom and in the hallways, and they swear and talk out loud in the classroom and walk around the classroom'. Pupils called for teachers to take action against specific pupils and their behaviours; for example, a girl in grade 6 remarked: 'Remove those who misbehave. The lessons would be good if you removed three pupils'. Although most of the examples of disruptive behaviours that pupils referred to took place in their classrooms during lessons, pupils also talked about how those who were disruptive in the classroom could equally behave in disruptive ways during break times. Overall, it was particularly noteworthy how pupils argued that specific pupils' disruptive behaviours could negatively affect the social climate among pupils more generally. For instance, a grade 9 girl's comment explains this aptly:

I think the climate among pupils is good, but sometimes some pupils, kind of problem pupils or whatever you would call them, are a bit chaotic towards others, and that affects the climate in a bad way.

Among the pupils, there was a tendency to label these disruptive pupils as 'problem pupils' or pupils 'like that' as this exchange between three grade 8 girls demonstrates:

Pupil 1: We don't have pupils like that who want to be seen and heard.

Pupil 2: Yes, trying to be cool, we don't have those pupils in our class.

Pupil 3: We have three of them, four, it's really annoying.

Furthermore, the analysis showed how the labels pupils used for pupils who they perceived to be disruptive were sometimes referenced to conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Whilst diagnoses were sometimes used as an explanation for certain pupils' disruptive behaviours, this was not always the case: in other instances, other pupils' disruptive behaviours were explained in terms of personality or other intrinsic factors. Our analysis indicated a peer discourse that linked diagnoses with a number of individual problems, such as becoming angry easily or, as in the discussion between grade 4 girls below, defining a condition as a type of 'messiness':

Pupil 2: What is ADHD?

Pupil 3: That you have difficulties sitting down and ...

Pupil 1: You have to move around.

Pupil 3: Yes, you're a bit messy.

It was interesting to note that the pupils perceived as disruptive were viewed, to some extent, as being responsible for why these behaviours occurred. In sum, our analysis revealed how the pupils in our study frequently used so-called *within-pupil explanations*, including *diagnoses-within-pupil explanations*, to make sense of disruptive behaviours in school. However, they also complicated their arguments by highlighting how, from their perspective, other factors – such as the teacher – explained the emergence of disruptive behaviours, as we explain in the subsection that follows.

(b) Teaching style explanations

In addition to within-pupil explanations, our analysis identified that pupils raised *teaching style explanations* to reason why disruptive behaviours occurred. These explanations included the teachers' (in)actions and issues related to the curriculum and teaching. For example, some pupils argued that what they perceived to be a poor teaching style could lead to a classroom situation in which pupils lose motivation and/or grasp of meaning, creating a situation from which disruptive behaviours may then develop. Such an explanation is captured here in the description given by a grade 8 boy:

It happens mostly when pupils are tired or if no-one understands. I mean, the task, if no-one understands the task then pupils start to move around because they don't know what to do.

It was evident from the analysis that teachers were positioned as being responsible for creating a good learning environment by varying their teaching methods, explaining the task and helping pupils so that all pupils would be able to understand. However, the issue of how teachers dealt with disruption emerged in the data, with pupils describing how teachers did so in various ways and perceiving the actions to have varying degrees of success. How teachers responded to disruption was sometimes regarded as non-acting or wrong-acting, with one grade 9 boy commenting that 'Some teachers are dull compared to others, they let us do whatever we want, and then the situation turns out the way it turns out'.

It was interesting to note that the pupils recognised this as a problem in the classroom as well as during breaks and linked this with the notion of feeling safe and/or unsafe. A sense of being unsafe at school seemed to transfer between the classroom, and the playground when pupils experienced teacher non-intervention; they argued that those who misbehaved in the classroom were, to a large extent, the same ones who were involved in fights or conflicts during breaks. The analysis suggested that pupils wanted their teachers to be stricter and helpful both during breaks and in the classroom, as this would enhance their learning environment and increase their sense of safety. Thus, from a pupil's perspective, teacher consistency – meaning that teachers maintained rules and school safety in the classroom and in the playground, and that all teachers applied the same rules – was regarded as an important component in teachers' work to create and enforce order and safety.

Other strategies that pupils in this study considered to be efficient teaching methods for enforcing rules, maintaining a safe and positive classroom order and counteracting disruptive behaviours included moving problematic pupils to a smaller room. For example, a grade 6 girl observed 'During the lesson it is good if the teacher removes three persons'. It was also thought to be beneficial if teachers collaborated with other teachers

so that more teachers would be present; as a grade 4 girl mentioned, 'I think we need more teachers because we have to wait for a long time to get help'.

The pupils also reported that disruptive behaviours took place more often when they had substitute teachers. They attributed this to these teachers' lack of authority and classroom management skills (i.e. poor teaching style), as a grade 9 girl explained:

It is better when they are stricter. Things are quieter during the lesson. But the pupils learn which teachers they can argue with, and some teachers are not respected, especially substitute teachers, because they don't care that much, and they're not tough enough. I think all teachers should have the same rules.

Some pupils considered the presence of substitute teachers to be a problem that reduced classroom order and school safety, and therefore wanted the school to avoid using substitute teachers and, instead, use their ordinary teachers as much as possible. As a boy in grade 6 put it, 'The disruptive pupils in our class, they are quite calm when we have our ordinary teacher'.

Furthermore, some of the pupils described their perceptions of how teachers might sometimes inadvertently create disruptive behaviours among pupils by representing negative role models through was regarded as poor teaching style – for example, by being too angry or inconsistent. For instance, one grade 4 boy commented, 'they should say, I will give you one last chance or else you will be dismissed from the classroom, and then stick to it'. It was clear from the analysis that the pupils connected teaching style with a sense of safety: they preferred and demanded active, kind and caring teachers who maintained classroom order, intervened when pupils misbehaved and enforced rules in a consistent manner. Thus, what was regarded as a good teaching style included reprimanding pupils in a consistent and fair way, reflecting the pupils' wishes for teachers who cared about them and making sure that the school and the classroom were safe learning environments. From the pupils' perspective, teachers who failed to establish and maintain order in the classroom or deal effectively with disruptive behaviours would get stuck with these repeatedly disruptive behaviours. According to the pupils, teachers had to prioritise disruptive pupils over other more compliant and well-behaved pupils, which made the latter feel unseen and less supported by the teachers as they could not get the attention and help they needed and wanted from the teacher in the classroom or during breaks.

In sum, our analysis of teaching style explanations highlighted pupils' perception that teachers could affect the classroom climate, levels of disruption and pupils' sense of school safety. Pupils evidently wanted teachers to maintain safety and order consistently, both in the classroom and in the playground. However, the social situation amongst pupils was also shown to be important. We now turn to the third category that we identified, which demonstrates how pupils explained the emergence of disruptive behaviour in terms of peer group processes.

(c) Peer group process explanations

In addition to within-pupil explanations and teaching style explanations, our analysis revealed that pupils occasionally also used peer group process explanations to account for the emergence of disruptive behaviours. In other words, the individual pupil perceived

as disruptive was sometimes placed in a peer group context that indicated how both social status and group processes could, in part, explain why disruptions occurred. Thus, pupils' positioning as disruptive/not disruptive could change according to the presence or non-presence of other pupils within the peer group. For example, one girl in grade 2 perceived that, when two pupils were absent, 'all the boys who usually tag along were really calm, and we had the calmest class ever'; a situation that she considered was reversed when the absent pupils returned.

Our analysis of pupils' comments indicated that they sometimes perceived disruptive behaviours to be the product of peer influence together with an expression of need for social belonging or recognition. We interpreted these suggested causes of disruptive behaviour as the group dynamics of friendship (i.e. disruptive behaviour as a result of friends coming together and acting as a peer group) and the peer process of social status (i.e. the striving for social status, where pupils try to impress others and become disruptive as an extension of trying to impress, or tagging along with these behaviours). Thus, pupils could become disruptive because they wanted to be 'cool'; as a girl in grade 5 observed, 'Some want to be cool in front of their friends and not listen to the teacher'. Pupils could also become disruptive as a result of group processes and peer pressure, in which they acted as members of peer groups regulated by disruptive group norms; for example, as a boy in grade 2 explained, 'When the teacher turns around then we are like monkeys, start screaming'.

Disruptive behaviour could also be understood, according to some pupils, as a result of social contamination, in which a disruptive norm emerges because of a few pupils' behaviours and then continues to spread throughout the classroom. For example, a girl in grade 8 described how some classmates started to talk and then others joined in: 'If everyone talks you also start to talk. You join the talking train'. Another issue raised by the pupils was the connection between disruptive behaviours and gender norms. In particular, disturbing behaviours seemed to be equated with 'being a boy', as was evident in this exchange between boys in grade 6:

Pupil 1: More than half of our class are boys.

Pupil 2: Yes, that's probably one of the reasons our class is messier.

Pupil 3: True, four more girls, removing four boys would ...

Additionally, girls who were described as disruptive were often portrayed as 'deviant'. For example, it was evident that girls who broke norms and expectations about how to be and act as a girl, and who instead acted like a 'disturbing boy', would run the risk of being disliked, rejected and excluded. By contrast, boys defined by peers as 'disturbing boys' were more often positioned as high-status pupils whom other pupils wanted to spend time with or impress. As previously mentioned, pupils who were perceived as disruptive were often those who misbehaved, including being aggressive, during breaks. In addition to the goal of impressing these pupils, pupils commented that, during breaks, they sometimes felt unsafe in the presence of such pupils and tried to avoid becoming involved in conflicts or fights with them. However, it was evident from the analysis that pupils were also sometimes positioned as bystanders to fights or teasing. In the discussion between grade 5 boys, below, these peer group processes also connected to exclusion processes, where joining in seemed to be the only solution:

Pupil 1: You're not someone who fights.

Pupil 2: No I haven't been in many fights.

Pupil 3: It's we, who usually . . .

Pupil 2: Before I used to be the tail in the fight. I wasn't at the centre, but I was like outside of it and watched or whatever you call it.

Pupil 3: I did that too a lot, I didn't do anything, I was just like, that person in the group who would do things I didn't want to do, but I did it to be friends with them, not to be excluded.

Thus, from these pupils' perspectives, it was evident that peers sometimes facilitated disruptive behaviours in school, even if they were not the ones who were enacting the disruptive behaviours.

Overall, according to the peer group process explanations, it is clear from our analysis that peer group processes connected to disruptive behaviours in different and complex ways, which influenced the school climate, including the classroom climate.

Discussion

The multifaceted aspects of how pupils talked about disruptive behaviours can be understood from a social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979). Pupils' interpretations and understandings of the emergence of disruptive behaviours in school can, therefore, be understood as a result of an ongoing interplay between individual and contextual factors, in which they co-construct a shared understanding within their micro-systems of classroom and peer groups. In this way, when disruptive behaviours emerge in the classroom, they are nested within different systems affecting the immediate situation (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979).

In this social process of explaining and understanding disruptive behaviour in school, we found within-pupil (including diagnoses-within-pupil) explanations to be a prominent shared understanding among the participants in terms of why pupils misbehaved in classrooms and other areas at school. This tendency to provide individualistic explanations has also been found in studies on how pupils explain bullying (Frisén, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson 2008; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011; Thornberg, Rosenqvist, and Johansson 2012) and how teachers and other school staff explain pupils' academic and behavioural problems at school (Farrell et al. 2009; Klingner and Harry 2006; Thornberg 2014), which is considered to be reflective of the individualism of Western culture at the macro level (e.g. Andreasson, Asp-Onsjö, and Isaksson 2013; Houston 2016). It is important to note that the individualistic explanations for pupils' disruptive behaviours ignore peer group, classroom, school and other possible contextual explanations – which, taken together, would arguably offer a fairer and more complete understanding. In line with stigma (Goffman 1963) and labelling theories (Becker 1963; Phelan and Link 1999), there is a risk that individualistic explanations tend to lead to self-fulfilling prophecies as the social processes categorise or label pupils with disruptive behaviours as deviant or 'problem pupils'. This, in turn, influences their identity and behaviour, and stigmatises them through others' perceptions, expectations, attitudes and behaviours towards them. It is, therefore, crucial to examine and consider the shared understandings that are socially constructed in

microsystems, mesosystems and exosystems within schools regarding how peers – as well as teachers and other school staff – think about and explain why pupils misbehave in school.

Interestingly, even though within-pupil explanations were a frequently used type of explanation, our analysis revealed that they were not the only explanations that the participants discussed in the focus group interviews. In our study, the pupils also connected pupils' disruptive behaviour with how their teachers conducted teaching and managed the pupils in and outside the classroom. Although the teaching style explanations could be interpreted as another set of individualistic explanations (i.e. the perception that the teacher is causing pupils to misbehave), when pupils talked about the teachers' actions or inactions, these connected to the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The microsystem level here refers to how pupils perceived that disruptive pupil behaviours in the classroom and in the playground may be connected with what they considered to be poor classroom management skills or teaching styles in these microsystems. The mesosystem level refers to how pupils perceived that poor teaching style in the classroom might result in misbehaviours, including aggressive behaviours, among pupils during breaks, and that, equally, poor teaching style in the playground could result in disruptive behaviours in the classroom. The exosystem level in our study refers to what goes on among teachers, such as deciding or not deciding to use a whole-school approach to enforce the same rules, and to aspects outside the immediate situation, such as the macrosystem (i.e. financial resources and other types of resources).

The pupils in the current study considered teacher–pupil relationships and interaction patterns – in which teachers are kind, helpful, caring and supportive, while also being strict and consistent and maintaining order – to be a teaching style that makes pupils less inclined to engage in disruptive behaviours and other forms of misbehaviour. They emphasised the need for teachers to be stricter and helpful, both during breaks and in the classroom, as this would affect how pupils perceive their school climate, with particular attention to how it would affect both their learning environment and their sense of safety. This is in line with previous research highlighting the importance of teachers, and everyone else working at the school forming positive, caring and supportive relationships with pupils. Such relationships have been found to be associated with less disruptive behaviours (Lei, Cui, and Chiu 2016; Quin 2017), violence and bullying (Aldridge and McChesney 2018; Lau, Wong, and Dudovitz 2018; Steffgen, Recchia, and Viechtbauer 2013), as well as improved academic engagement and achievement (Quin 2017; Roorda et al. 2017; Scales et al. 2020) among pupils.

Furthermore, pupils also suggested that if they have their ordinary teachers more often (as opposed to substitute teachers), and if teachers vary their teaching methods and split their classes into smaller groups more often, they would expect less disruptive behaviours in the classroom. Pupils mentioned a dilemma involving teachers having to help certain pupils more and thereby being unable to focus as much on the rest of the group. These kinds of matters connect to the structural conditions surrounding the situation (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Although it might be possible to change some aspects of the microsystem (e.g. rules, being stricter and teaching methods), other issues lie outside the situation at exosystem and macrosystem levels. Such issues include, for example, not having enough time for everyone due to a shortage of teachers, available space, financial

resources, or resources to work with pupils who need extra help, or other organisational issues. It was evident that pupils considered that the presence of teachers was important in terms of them being there to help pupils (being 'on task') and helping them feel safe. However, these aspects inevitably connect to the macrosystem, such as national political, policy-related and financial issues, or the exosystem, with decisions being made by the local school board (Bronfenbrenner 1979) in terms of how many teachers there will be and the type of teachers allocated to the school.

Within-individual explanations that refer to different diagnoses and gender are sometimes linked to peer group process explanations that connect the micro level to the macro level, such as normative gender expressions of the 'disorderly boy' type (Lyng 2009; Zimmerman 2018) and stigma norms connected to diagnoses (Parcesepe and Cabassa 2013; Kaushik, Kostaki, and Kyriakopoulos 2016; Walker et al. 2008). There might also be pupils with additional needs, which again raises questions of resources and knowledge about how to provide for all pupils to ensure equal opportunities. These issues relate to aspects of the exosystem and macrosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner 1979). It is important to acknowledge and counteract these stigmatising attitudes as they are likely to have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of any pupils with diagnoses (Parcesepe and Cabassa 2013; Kaushik, Kostaki, and Kyriakopoulos 2016; Walker et al. 2008).

Focusing on gender, masculinity norms have long been associated with school misbehaviour among boys (Asp-Onsjö and Öhrn 2015; Lyng 2009; Zimmerman 2018), with disruptions being associated with how boys position themselves in their social relations in order to construct masculinity (Asp-Onsjö and Öhrn 2015; Lyng 2009; Zimmerman 2018). Even if not all boys misbehave or dislike school, such gender-normative assumptions seem to evoke peer pressure that many boys have to relate to in one way or another (Heyder, van Hek, and Van Houtte 2021; Lyng 2009; Zimmerman 2018). Non-compliance with such masculinity norms puts boys at risk of being socially excluded and harassed on the grounds of gender (Zimmerman 2018), while compliance with these gender norms has a negative impact on their educational achievement (Heyder, van Hek, and Van Houtte 2021). In our study, there was – according to the pupil reports – a positioning of some boys as engaging in disruptive behaviours (in the classroom), and with a climate surrounding those pupils in which other pupils felt disinclined to intervene during playtime and perceived that insufficient was done to change the situation. It was also interesting to note that some of the girls who were discussed as being disruptive were not associated with high social status, but rather the opposite. Disruptive girls might be perceived as challenging the gendered association between 'boy' and 'disruption'. Overall, our findings regarding the pupils' perspectives on disruptive behaviours draw attention to the importance of addressing and counteracting stereotypical gender norms as a part of teachers' classroom management and the establishment of a safe, supportive and orderly classroom and school climate.

Another peer group process explanation discussed in the focus group interviews was that practically all pupils could potentially engage in disruptive behaviours under certain conditions, such as when they try to gain social status or want to have fun together when bored – which, in turn, influences the school climate, including the classroom climate. While the latter example includes an interplay between teaching style explanations (school, teaching or lessons perceived as boring) and peer group process explanations (co-constructing disruptive behaviours to have fun together), in the former example, the

peer group process of gaining social status connects the settings of the playground and the classroom. As a mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the pupils in our study linked these two settings to each other and discussed how this interrelation could produce and transfer disruptive behaviours and negative social climate between the settings. It was evident that they considered that this interaction between the different school settings affected their sense of safety, their academic focus and their perceptions of the school climate. By revealing an interaction between different school settings and disruptive behaviours, the pupils' perceptions in this regard could be seen as reflective of Lleras' (2008) concept of 'a hostile school climate': one that 'exists when students experience disruptive, threatening, or harassing situations that directly or indirectly draw attention from the learning environment. These hostile situations can occur within the classroom and throughout the day in a variety of locations on school grounds'. (Lleras 2008, 109). However, our findings also point towards the importance of teachers, and in particular how they can influence the social dynamics in the classroom and in the playground.

Limitations

Our small-scale, in-depth qualitative study comes with some limitations. We have analysed what pupils say about disruptive behaviours, but we do not know how prevalent these behaviours were. Thus, our results rely on group interview data, which can be problematic in terms of ecological validity: what pupils say that they and their peers do during a focus group setting and what they and their peers *actually* do in their everyday, real-life setting would not necessarily be the same. Future observational and ethnographic studies should, therefore, be carried out to build on the current study. Pupils also talked about how anyone, including themselves, could become disruptive, but still referred to certain pupils as more disruptive. The focus groups might have affected these responses, making it more difficult to self-identify as being a disruptive pupil – even if some pupils occasionally did so. However, in accordance with an interpretative qualitative tradition and a constructivist position of grounded theory, we do not claim to offer an exact picture – but, rather, an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon studied (Charmaz 2014). Nevertheless, further studies might utilise individual interviews to allow for additional positions. As we conducted a single school study, findings should be interpreted with caution as an individual setting is not necessarily representative of any other contexts. Randomised, large samples and quantitative analyses would be needed for statistical generalisation. In qualitative studies, however, generalisability may be discussed meaningfully and contextually in other terms, such as generalisation through the recognition of patterns (Larsson 2009), in which the reader, not the researcher, judges generalisability. What we know with reference to the contextualising body of previous literature is that several factors interact in the shaping of the school climate. Our small-scale, in-depth study contributes to this body of research by offering valuable insights into pupils' perspectives on their school climate.

Conclusions

Our study highlights some important implications for teachers and schools. It is evident from the literature that the reasons for disruptive behaviours are many and complex,

including considerations related to pupils and teachers (Levin and Nolan 2014; Tanase 2019) and the organisation (Tanase 2019). Our analysis of pupils' perspectives suggested that, from pupils' viewpoints, both peers and teachers played a significant role in shaping the pupils' experience of the school climate, including the prevalence or otherwise of disruptive behaviours. Pupils' shared understanding of how teachers can positively affect the school climate draws our attention to the importance of a whole-school approach, with teachers being attentive and authoritative (i.e. conveying warmth/responsivity and providing structure/order – not to be confused with authoritarianism), and establishing positive, caring and supportive relationships with pupils in the classroom and in the playground. Teachers have the opportunity to affect the school climate by working with the social dynamics (Farmer, Lines, and Hamm 2011; Farmer et al. 2018; Hamm and Hoffman 2016). Although the pupils tended to focus on individualistic explanations, their perspectives also suggested how disruptive behaviours can be understood as nested within different layers of factors that, together, produce disruptive behaviours. Some of these aspects are affected by structural aspects beyond the immediate situation (exosystems and macrosystems). Our exploration of pupil perspectives also points to the importance of a whole-school approach, in which teachers work together with colleagues and pupils to promote a positive school climate for everyone.

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