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A qualitative study of Swedish pupils' perspectives on supportive school climates and help-seeking

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore pupils' perspectives on school climate, with a focus on help-seeking from teachers when experiencing unsafe incidents. Fifty-nine focus group interviews were conducted with pupils from two public schools in grades 1–9 (i.e. ages 7–15 years) in Sweden and analyzed with constructivist grounded theory. The findings address how the organizational support structure was crucial and three main categories were conceptualized from pupils' perspectives: (1) teachers as sources of support; (2) availability of support; and (3) consistent and responsive support. The way in which pupils perceived these three dimensions, and thus the organizational support structure, were crucial to whether they considered help-seeking from teachers when they experienced unsafe incidents such as violence, bullying or conflicts. To conceptualize the pupils' perspectives on the organizational support structure and help-seeking we adopted a social-ecological perspective as a theoretical framework. Social-ecological factors such as scheduling, and information provided (exosystem) and the pupil-teacher relationships (microsystem) were found to be especially important in relation to the organizational support structure and pupils' help-seeking. Our findings suggests that it is imperative for schools to pay attention to the organizational support structure and especially consider the teacher-pupil relationship quality and how scheduling, information about support sources, and a consistent and responsive approach from all teachers affects pupils' help-seeking and the building of a supportive school climate and safety for all pupils at school.

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Introduction

To increase pupils' academic achievement, well-being and interpersonal relationship at school (Wang & Degol, 2016), attention has been put on the school climate, defined as the quality and character of everyday school life (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 5). School climate refers to the

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'shared beliefs, values and attitudes that shape interactions between the pupils, teachers, and administrators' (Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 272) and is a multidimensional construct including sense of safety at school, school belongingness, pupil-teacher relationship quality, and peer-to-peer relationship quality (Wang & Degol, 2016). Studies show how a supportive school climate is associated with pupils' academic achievement (Demirtas-Zorbaz et al., 2021; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015), wellbeing (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015), and safety (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018), including a reduction in bullying (Aldridge et al., 2018; Konishi et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2018; Zych et al., 2019). Ensuring pupils' sense of school safety is imperative because pupils who feel unsafe in school are at a higher risk of school absenteeism and academic failure (Hughes et al., 2015).

A supportive school climate includes caring, supportive, responsive and fair teachers (Eliot et al., 2010; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). The role of teacher support has been associated with pupils' school belonging (Allen et al., 2018), school liking (Graham et al., 2022; Thornberg et al., 2023), academic achievement (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2017), sense of safety at school (Lenzi et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2018), perception of school climate (Konishi et al., 2022) and less bullying and peer victimization (Kloo et al., 2023; Ten Bokkel et al., 2022; Thornberg et al., 2022). The degree to which pupils are willing to seek help and report to adults in school that they have been bullied reflects the extent to which teachers have managed to establish a supportive school climate (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). In addition, pupils' help-seeking and reporting of bullying have been linked to how they perceive the pupil-teacher relationships (Aldridge et al., 2018; Berkowitz, 2014; Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Eliot et al., 2010).

Pupils' trust in their teachers is crucial to whether or not pupils seek help. If they believe that teachers will be responsive, they are more willing to seek help and report unsafe incidents (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Distrust of adults inhibits victimized pupils from reporting bullying (Bjereld, 2018). Furthermore, pupils who perceive their teachers to be caring, respectful, and interested in them have been found to be more willing to seek help from a teacher when bullying takes place (Eliot et al., 2010). Aldridge et al. (2018) also highlight how both the provided support and pupils' awareness about where to seek support may affect pupils' help-seeking.

Most studies on school climate have utilized quantitative designs, which have provided a great deal of critical information about aspects of the school climate. At the same time, qualitative methods are scarce in the school climate literature (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Grazia & Molinari, 2021; Thapa et al., 2013), even though they give opportunities to explore insider perspective, gain a deeper understanding of pupils' experiences, and examine nuances that might be less visible in large-scale studies.

Qualitative studies of how pupils perceive and experience school climate are especially needed (Konishi et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2020), considering that school climate is associated with a range of pupil outcomes (e.g. Bradshaw et al., 2021).

A recent qualitative study exploring pupils' perspectives (Konishi et al., 2022) identified 15 dimensions of school climate. Dimensions with relevance to this study include school safety, school belonging, acceptance of diversity, rules, peer interactions, pupil-teacher relationships, school resources, and different types of support (Konishi et al., 2022). In the study, pupils perceived trust as crucial to their pupil-teacher relationships. The sense of trust affected their perceptions of teacher support, respect and responsiveness. These aspects may be relevant to pupils' willingness to seek help from teachers if they are in trouble, feel unsafe or are peer victimized (cf., Aldridge et al., 2018; Berkowitz, 2014; Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Eliot et al., 2010). In our study, we utilize a qualitative design aimed at exploring pupils' perspectives on school climate with a focus on help-seeking from teachers when experiencing unsafe incidents.

Theoretical framework: a social-ecological perspective on school climate

School climate and pupils' willingness to tell adults about unsafe incidents are influenced by layers of contexts in school and beyond. In the current study, we adopted a social-ecological perspective as a theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological framework, a complex set of relations between four systems (eg., micro, meso, exo- and macro system) are interconnected in shaping the immediate environment of developing individuals. School climate, then, is embedded within several interconnected systems, such as peer processes and pupil-teacher relationships (microsystem), the interrelations between different systems (mesosystem), and systems that do not involve the pupil but still affect the school climate, such as organizational aspects and the local school board (exosystem) and societal norms and structural aspects (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A social-ecological perspective has been widely used in previous studies on school climate (e.g. Allen et al., 2018; Dorio et al., 2020; Forsberg et al., 2022; Nickerson et al., 2014; Wang & Degol, 2016). This perspective can focus attention on how pupils' perspectives on school climate, school safety and relationships at school are influenced by various layers (Zumbrunn et al., 2013) and dimensions such as quality of interpersonal relationships, security provided and the institutional environment (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Methods and research process

This study is part of a larger project investigating pupils and teachers' perspectives on the pupil-teacher relationship, social climate in the school and school classes and how pupils perceive sense of safety, school belonging, disputes and bullying. Ethical approval was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board prior to any data collection. All pupils and caregivers were informed about the project and we have obtained parental consent. Pupils were informed about their voluntary participation, promised that information would be confidential and anonymized, and have been given pseudonyms.

The data for this study were gathered at two time points at two public schools. School A was an elementary and lower secondary school including grades 1–9 (approximately ages 7–15) located in a small village, whereas School B was an elementary school including grades 1–6 (approximately ages 7–12) located in a medium-sized city in Sweden. All pupils from grade 1–9 and grade 1–6 at the two schools were asked to participate in the study ($N = 697$) and we received parental consent from 365 pupils, whom gave their consent to participate in addition. In each school and grade, a focus groups of six boys and focus groups of six girls were then organized through a random sampling procedure. In total we conducted 59 focus group interviews (41 focus groups attained 6 participants, while 18 focus groups included 4–5 participants due to absence or sickness). In the first wave, 164 pupils (78 boys and 86 girls) participated in 29 focus group interviews, while 168 pupils (82 boys and 86 girls) participated in 30 focus group interviews one year later in the second wave.

The focus group interviews were conducted by the first and second authors using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. The interview questions focused on pupils' general perceptions of how they perceive the school climate, how safe they feel at school, how they view relationships at school, and how they perceive spaces in school. We were guided by what aspects and concerns the participants raised and probing questions were used to further explore the pupils' perspectives. In the second wave, we also added questions on changes or similarities to the previous year.

During the study, we did not experience any situations of discomfort but were attentive to the participants well-being and did not probe or continue the interview if we sensed something could be uncomfortable talking about. We were also prepared to validate the participants experiences and explore if they have someone to talk to and to provide information about where they could otherwise find support (Charmaz, 2014). Because pupils most often form same-gender friendships (Evaldsson & Karlsson, 2020), and some researchers argue that same-gender focus groups are in particular suitable for school-age pupils to discuss sensitive topics (Hoppe et al., 1995), we chose to conduct gender-segregated focus groups as pupils then might feel more comfortable to discuss gendered dimensions of the school climate.

All interviews took place at the pupils' own schools in assigned rooms with closed doors and with only one interviewer present. Interviews were recorded and ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. We have transcribed all the interviews verbatim.

To explore pupils' perspectives, we collected and analyzed the data guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) where the focus is in exploring how the participants make sense of and understand their social worlds and what meanings and processes they highlight. During initial coding, we stayed close to and remained open to explore what was happening in the data. We constructed initial codes as we moved carefully through the data word by word and line by line. By constantly comparing data with data, codes with codes, and codes with new data, we found that a main concern among the pupils when talking about school climate was their attention on factors associated with help-seeking when experiencing something unsafe at school. We thus chose to explore these factors in more detail during focused coding. In this coding phase, we used the most recurring and comprehensive codes developed during initial coding to compare against the data and later to develop categories. The relationships between our focused codes were further explored during theoretical coding. During theoretical coding, we put the categories together to create an analytical story of our data by also applying a social-ecological perspective. Our findings and data are viewed as co-constructed by researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014; Forsberg, 2022).

Findings

Organizational support structure and help-seeking

The core category of this constructed grounded theory is entitled *organizational support structure* and refers to how the schools organize as well as provide support to pupils. According to the analysis of the focus group data, the pupils' experiences of the organizational support structure of their school was crucial to whether they considered help-seeking from teachers when they experienced unsafe incidents at school such as violence, bullying or conflicts. Three main categories reflected pupils' perspectives on their school's organizational support structure: (1) teachers as sources of support; (2) availability of support; and (3) consistent and responsive support. The way in which pupils perceived these three dimensions affected their help-seeking from teachers. While some pupils viewed the organizational support structure as more supportive, others viewed it as less supportive or even non-supportive. This brings attention to how pupils' help-seeking is nested within different systems and dimensions. Various social-ecological factors such as organizational aspects (exosystem), pupil-teacher relationships (microsystem) and the involvement of parents in school-related problems (mesosystem) seemed to be important in relation to the

organizational support structure and pupils' help-seeking. In relation to the involvement of parents, incidents related to macrosystem level norms were also identified. This brings attention to how aspects of the school climate such as the quality of relationships, the security provided, and organizational aspects are considered important in pupils help-seeking (Wang & Degol, 2016). While our three main categories connect to each other, we will deal with them one at a time for the sake of clarity.

Teachers as sources of support

Based on the pupils' narratives, teachers were pointed out as people whom they could seek help from if unsafe incidents occurred. However, not all teachers were considered to be sources of support. The pupils highlighted a close and well-developed relationship with teachers as a condition for viewing them as a source of support, and someone to turn to and seek for help. Thus, they needed to know the teachers and trust them. Viewing someone as a source of support was also associated with pupils' awareness of sources of support at the school. From a social-ecological perspective, the category *teachers as sources of support* highlights the importance of the microsystem and the pupil-teacher relationship, but also exosystem factors such as the organization of support at the school and how informed pupils are about sources of support.

To start with, teachers were considered to be the adults in the school organization who should provide school safety to the pupils by being close to them and supporting them in various ways; for example, when disputes or violence among pupils emerged or if a pupil was alone or peer rejected (e.g. 'Teachers, they are good to sort things out when something happens at break-time,' Max, grade 3, School B). Based on our analysis of pupils' reported experiences and perceptions, their sense of school safety was associated with whether they perceived teacher support in real or potentially unpleasant or distressful situations, as shown below.

Alma: I feel safe because there are so many kind teachers who can always help. When my friend was sad, she went to a teacher and we could talk about it, why she was sad, and then it feels much better. (Grade 4, School B)

In the example above, teachers are associated with being a source of support and being helpful in unsafe situations. While teachers in general were pointed out as a source of support, some pupils also highlighted their anti-bullying team as a source of support at the school. Both schools had such a team, and this group was usually a smaller group of teachers at the school that had extra responsibility to work on issues of safety, violence, harassment and bullying. When pupils were aware of these teams and their function, they seemed more likely to consider this team as a source of help. An example of this can be seen below.

Nilla: I go to the anti-bullying team and say 'I've been bullied.' It was someone in the 6th grade who said I had a very ugly cap and then I'll talk to someone in the anti-bullying group, because they'll know exactly what to do. They have been trained for what to do if someone is being bullied. (Grade 1, School B)

As seen in this example, Nilla turns to the anti-bullying team because of (a) trust in its capacity to help and (b) could identify the anti-bullying team members. However, some pupils were less aware of this help-seeking option, the functions of anti-bullying teams, and the identity of the team members. Therefore, these pupils were less inclined to consider the anti-bullying team as a source of support and to turn to it in order to seek help.

Sean: Never heard of it .

Bob: Someone said they exist.

Henry: I have only seen some message saying they have a meeting.

Interviewer: Have you heard about it?

Bob: I've heard of it

Interviewer: Do you know what it is?

Henry: Someone who will make it safe at school.

Interviewer: Do you know who they are?

Bob: No. (Grade 8, School A)

The boys in the excerpt above did not know much about the anti-bullying team at their school. They neither knew who the team members were, nor the team's exact purpose. Altogether, this lack of knowledge ruled out the anti-bullying team as a perceived available source of support. While awareness of this organizational support opportunity seemed relevant for whether pupils would consider turning to this group, the most important source of teacher support at school was access to trustworthy teachers in the pupils' everyday school lives. Some pupils talked about how they had a closer relationship with their everyday teacher than those teachers in the anti-bullying group, a relationship that became relevant when considering sources of support.

Jen: I think we know our teachers better than teachers in the anti-bullying team and then it feels better to tell someone you know.

Mia: If you are feeling unsafe then you forget about them [the anti-bullying team]. Because I don't think about them, that they exist, and then I would turn to my teacher instead. (Grade 5, School B)

The excerpt illustrates how the more proximal microsystem of pupil-teacher relationships provided a more available source of support than the more distal and – from the pupils' perspectives – less personally-connected anti-bullying team. It was easier to turn to someone they knew and had a relational history with than to a more abstract team of teachers they did not know or have a relationship with. Some pupils also raised the importance of trusting and safe relationships with their teachers as connected to help-seeking.

Interviewer: Who would you turn to if something happened?

Nils: A teacher you feel safe with. It can be any teacher, but someone you trust above all. (Grade 9, School A)

As seen in the example, any teacher could be considered a source of support, but feeling trust and safety was crucial. A main condition for whether pupils would consider seeking help from the anti-bullying team was *informed awareness* about support structures at the school (i.e. knowing that the team existed, why it existed, what it was able to do, and which teachers were in the team). A main condition for whether pupils would consider seeking help from their everyday teachers was the *pupil-teacher relationship quality*. Teachers who were perceived as close, caring, responsive and trustworthy became a key source of support for pupils. From a social-ecological perspective, organizational aspects (exosystem) such as informed awareness about support sources seemed crucial, but also building trusting and safe relationships between pupils and teachers (microsystem). According to the pupils, the everyday teachers seem to have built such relationships more often. However, in the next session, the issue of the availability of support was raised, as this also shaped whether pupils sought help from teachers, including both their own teachers and the anti-bullying team.

Availability of support

While teachers were considered to be a source of support, associated with the organizational support structure and making the school climate safe, pupils raised different social-ecological factors that influenced the availability of support in relation to their help-seeking. From a social-ecological perspective, the category *availability of support* raises exosystem factors such as scheduling of

teachers, number of teachers and unclear information as aspects that affected whether teachers were available and whether pupils considered teachers to be available when pupils needed help. According to the pupils, most of the unsafe incidents took place during breaktime. It is common in Swedish schools that teachers are scheduled to be out at breaktime together with pupils to support pupils in various ways and arrange activities (Swedish Agency for Education, 2022). This was also the case at the two schools in this study. Therefore, the presence of attentive and responsive teachers during breaktime on the playground and in corridors was viewed as a key source of support and school safety.

Interviewer: How safe are pupils here at school?

Elliot: I think most feel safe.

Sven: There are not that many disputes and I don't see any bullying.

Elliot: And there are many teachers outdoors who notice if something is going on.
(Grade 5, School B)

According to these pupils, teachers who were present or close by, many in number, noticed what happened among the pupils, and intervened if unsafe events such as violence, teasing, bullying or ostracism emerged contributed to pupils' sense of school safety and their ability to immediately turn to a teacher if they needed help. In contrast, some pupils gave examples of how they had to spend a significant amount of time searching for an available teacher while at the same time highlighting how teachers were not always available when needed. In the example below, Leo said he was turning to a teacher in case he needed support but also noted that he sometimes had to search for an available teacher.

Interviewer: If you are bullied or something happens?

Leo: Then I immediately go to a teacher. I find a teacher monitoring the break. If we cannot find anyone, we go to the classroom. If they are not there, well, then we must wait until we find someone. (Grade 2, School A)

In the excerpt above, Leo reported that he would turn to a teacher immediately if needed but also that he and other pupils might have to search for a teacher at times. On the playground, pupils in need searched for and turned to any available teacher rather than a specific teacher, but there were pupils in the study who also highlighted how they wanted teachers to be closer by and outdoors. They especially wanted their own everyday teacher to be more available, as seen in the excerpt below.

Sally: Tommie [her class teacher], is mostly in the staff room, and if there is a dispute when we tell someone to stop, they might say 'go and get a teacher then,' and then we often need to go to the staff room and get Tommie. I want him to be outside more often. (Grade 3, School A)

In this example, Sally asks for her everyday teacher Tommie to be more available, which may be connected to her closer relationship with and trust in him. In general, pupils expressed that they felt safer seeking help from their everyday teachers since they knew them better and, in general, had closer relationships with them than with other teachers. The issue with the staff room was also raised and it was noted that they did not want to go and search for the teacher in the staff room. In relation to this, some pupils reported that they did not know what to do if teachers were not available and whether they could approach teachers if they were not scheduled to be outdoors during breaktime, but instead expected to be in the staff room. As seen in the example below, this made pupils hesitate to seek support and led them to sort out the incident themselves.

Melker: There are not many teachers available, because sometimes they are at the far end in the staff room, and we don't know if we are allowed to go into the staff room and then we must knock [on the door]. And if they don't hear us, we must solve the incident ourselves.

Ronnie: Because they have their staff room and, maybe we should not go there to interrupt. Because then they might be angry. (Grade 5, School A)

Here, the pupils discussed obstacles that inhibited them from seeking help from teachers in terms of low teacher availability in some breaktime situations and how they were unsure if they were allowed to approach the teachers when they were in the staff room. The latter showed that pupils perceived rules and regulations regarding their possible access to the staff room and to teachers who were in the staff room during breaktimes to be unclear. This can be understood as an example of *rule diffusion*, which refers to 'uncertainty and interpretation difficulties regarding which rules are in force and how they should be applied' (Thornberg, 2007, p. 413). The rule diffusion regarding whether pupils were allowed to approach teachers in the staff room contributed to a sense of school unsafety and created an uncertainty about whether or not a teacher should be considered available. This also suggests a variability in teacher's availability, which could have consequences for pupils' when they experience something unsafe.

Johnny: When something happens there are no adults. Maybe there are like three teachers outdoors and they are all on the big playground, so when something is happening down here no one takes care of it. And it takes time to get a teacher, then the pupil is already sad. (Grade 6, School B)

According to this example, teacher availability is also connected to playground design, where some spots did not have teachers close by and available. The search for a teacher to help out also seemed to make the situation worse for some pupils. It should also be noted that some pupils took on the role of support when teachers were not available.

Celine: That's why I usually intervene myself, because there are no break guard teachers outside, and then I can't run away from there and then run in and search.

Olivia: It's quite annoying to run back and forth.

Marit: If you intervene yourself, then it usually doesn't work. Pupils just say, 'If it's not a teacher who tells me to stop, then it doesn't matter' (Grade 2, School A)

As described in this example, some pupils occasionally tried to do something themselves when teachers were not available, but with varying success. From a social-ecological perspective, exosystem factors such as how the support is organized during breaktime and how teachers are scheduled seems crucial to consider. It also appears important to provide pupils with information on which teachers can be asked for help and where they can be found. Creating an organizational awareness and openness that builds on supportive relationships is crucial. In this example, it seems the lack of available teachers creates feelings of uncertainty among pupils and makes them hesitate to turn to teachers. In addition to being available, it was also important that teachers were responsive and consistent in their support.

Consistent and responsive support

From a social-ecological perspective, the degree to which teachers in the school altogether provided consistent and responsive support points to whether the whole school approach is enforced within the organization (exosystem). This is in turn reflected how pupils experience the pupil-teacher relationship quality and consider the teacher as a source of support or not (microsystem). In this category, *consistent and responsive support*, pupils also report that they will not seek help if teachers are not responsive but instead consider involving parents in school-related problems (mesosystem). According to some pupils, teachers were considered helpful and supportive, making pupils express that they felt safe and cared for in school and would seek support from teachers if needed.

Norma: I think most of them [pupils] feel quite safe. Because I don't feel too worried about something happening. And if something should happen, I know that I can tell an adult and they will be on my side. (Grade 5, School B)

As seen in this excerpt, Norma connected her own and other pupils' sense of school safety with available teachers who would listen to, support and help pupils who turned to them because of unsafe incidents. Thus, teacher

availability was necessary but not sufficient for pupils to feel safe in school and be willing to tell teachers about unsafe incidents. A sense of safety and a willingness to turn to teachers also required that the pupils perceived and believed that teachers would intervene and provide efficient help and support if something happened and pupils turned to them. Some pupils described that they experienced a difference between teachers in terms of *teacher responsiveness*: some teachers would help and support them, whereas other teachers would not.

Larry: You know what will happen, who you choose. If I choose someone I really trust it will be fine, I know who it would be.

James: The leisure teacher wants to do something about it, so that you are safe. But the teachers, they don't do anything about it, even if you tell them. And so if you sit in a meeting if there has been a fight, nothing happens afterwards. You just say sorry and then it's the same thing the next day. (Grade 8, School A)

According to these excerpts, inconsistent and neglectful responses made pupils selective in terms of who they chose to turn to. Pupils' sense of school safety and trust in teachers were undermined if they experienced widespread *teacher neglect*, meaning that teachers did not show care, intervene, and provide help and support when pupils in need turned to them. This also shows how the organizational support structure could be rather fragile. Teachers who were unresponsive and neglectful when pupils told them about unsafe incidents contributed, from the pupils' perspectives, to a more general lack of safety and a poor school climate. Therefore, some pupils asked for teachers to be more responsive – 'If, for example, the teachers see someone being mistreated, they should step forward and support the student. And don't ignore it like some teachers do'. (Carlos, grade 6, School B) – and some asked for teachers to enforce more consequences if someone had done something mean: 'I think there should be more consequences if someone has done something mean, not just empty threats' (Jasmine, grade 9, School A). Examples like these show the importance of consistent and responsive interventions to make pupils feel safe and cared for. When the organizational support structure in schools failed, some pupils reported how parents became involved to deal with unsafe incidents such as the social exclusion experienced at school. In the example below, the pupil experienced social exclusion, but as the school was perceived to be unresponsive, help was sought from parents.

Mandy: When I was socially excluded, the teachers didn't respond that much, and then my parents called those people involved instead.

Interviewer: Called their parents?

Mandy: Yes.

Interviewer: What happened then?

Mandy: I was excluded, and they called my name when I didn't want them to.

Interviewer: Did it become better when they called the parents?

Mandy: Yes. (grade 3, school A)

As seen in this example, Mandy reported that her teachers failed to provide her with adequate support and help when she was socially excluded and verbally victimized. Instead, her parents became involved and tried to support her to deal with the situation. From a social-ecological perspective this also shows how parents become involved in school-related issues. In relation to this, there was also a reported incident where a parent intervened to support a teacher who was targeted by some pupils.

Anna: There were three boys who were very mean to a teacher and did disgusting things. A bump-dancing against her. And she was not from Sweden and was scared and started to cry. And then, the children's teacher passed by, but he didn't care. My mom said to him, 'shouldn't you take care of your pupils? They are mean,' and she told him what had happened. And he just said, 'I will deal with it later.'

Interviewer: What would you have wanted the teacher to do?

Anna: He should have intervened and taken the pupils to a room carefully and talked with them because they are not allowed to act like that. (Grade 6, School A)

In this incident, Anna described how her mother, who was visiting the school, observed an incident where some pupils were dancing in a sexual manner towards a teacher with a foreign background and how she was crying. Anna's mother observed a teacher who was responsible for the pupils who were doing this to the teacher, but he was described as non-responsive. This lack of response from the teacher was, in turn, observed by Anna, also highlighting the whole situation as a situation that pupils should not have engaged in and how she thinks the teacher should have responded. The incident touches upon macrosystem elements involving racial and gendered aspects. While this situation is being described from the pupils' perspectives and we do not know what happened in the actual situation, previous studies have addressed how exo- and macrosystem factors shape teachers' anti-bullying and school climate work (Horton et al., 2020; Samnøy et al., 2022).

This section shows how failures in the organizational support structure can affect pupils' help-seeking from teachers. Pupils did not turn to teachers if they considered such efforts to be unhelpful. In contrast, pupils experienced a safe

school climate and a willingness to turn to teachers when they perceived available teachers who were close, caring, reliable and responsive, who maintained school safety in a responsive and consistent manner, and who provided support and intervened in unsafe incidents and when pupils turned to them.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore pupils' perspectives on school climate with a focus on help-seeking from teachers when experiencing unsafe incidents. Pupils pointed to how sources of support, the availability of support, and consistent and responsive support were crucial in their help-seeking and for their sense of school safety. These three dimensions constituted their perceptions of the organizational support structure at their schools. Pupils had varying perspectives on the organizational support structure, which was reflected in their perspective on help-seeking. For some pupils, the school climate was supportive, whereas for others it was not (cf., Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). This is where the social-ecological factors were of importance. In terms of the microsystem, pupils reported that they would be more inclined to turn to teachers and tell them about unsafe incidents if their relationships with them were close and supportive. This is in line with previous studies showing the importance of pupil-teacher relationships (Konishi et al., 2022). In addition, specifically designed staff groups such as the anti-bullying teams were only considered to be a group to turn to for help if pupils were aware of them, their functions, members, and capacities to help. This confirms previous research underlining the importance of pupils' awareness of support (Aldridge et al., 2018).

The findings address how relationships and awareness are closely related to the organizational level (exosystem). When pupils talked about the need for consistent, responsive, available, and present teachers, they also highlighted the importance of close and supportive pupil-teacher relationships and the need for teachers to be caring, responsive and helpful in order to make pupils more willing to turn to them for help. Again, the organizational level and providing a school climate where all teachers care and are responsive is needed for all pupils to consider seeking help. Otherwise, only some pupils experience a supportive school climate, while others could experience a more inconsistent and unsafe school climate where their help-seeking risks becoming fragile if they are dependent on only certain teachers. Some pupils also pointed to how they involved parents instead if they felt that teachers were non-responsive. The involvement of parents in school-related problems highlights how the mesosystem level becomes important in pupils help-seeking when the organizational support structure is lacking. While schools should involve parents, especially if their children have concerns

at school, parents are not the ones responsible for what goes on in school. This points to an organizational failure affecting the situation for some pupils in a considerable way.

Teacher availability during breaktimes was another factor that we found to influence pupils' sense of school safety and help-seeking. Attentive and responsive teachers needed to be present and available at the breaktime areas, according to the pupils. These findings can be related to previous research showing how pupils' experiences of unsafe school places are associated with adult absence or lack of supervision (Langhout & Annear, 2011; Vaillancourt et al., 2010) and with school personnel who do not always pay attention to violence among pupils (Borg, 2023).

Pupils also reported how teachers were sometimes easy to find when needed, while others said there were too few teachers available. Pupils also pointed to how they sometimes had to search for a teacher, especially in the staff room, and how they were sometimes hesitant to go to the staff room, either because they did not want to abandon the incident or because they were unsure if teachers in the staff room were considered to be available. Issues of availability point to the exosystem level and how scheduling of teachers becomes crucial for pupils help-seeking. In addition, information about who is an available source of support was also crucial as lacking awareness about this could cause uncertainty for the pupils when they needed to seek help. This raises questions about the provided help-seeking structure (cf., Aldridge et al., 2018), since pupils' awareness of where to seek support as well as the support they receive if they seek support could affect help-seeking.

The macrosystem level, addressing structural aspects and social norms, of course influences the school climate and pupils' help-seeking. We saw an example of how a parent intervened in an incident at school related to gendered and racial norms and structures. We also know from previous studies how schools' and teachers' work are affected by organizational and structural factors (Allen et al., 2018, Horton et al., 2020, Samnøy et al., 2022; Thapa et al., 2013).

The current findings based on pupils' perspectives support previous studies showing how pupils' willingness to seek help reflects how pupils perceive their relationships with their teachers (Aldridge et al., 2018; Berkowitz, 2014; Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Eliot et al., 2010). In particular, our study shows how teachers' perceived responses were considered when seeking help (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Our findings also lend support to the fact that both provided support and support structure become crucial in pupils' help-seeking (Aldridge et al., 2018). As found by Konishi et al. (2022) trust in their pupil-teacher relationships were related to pupils' perceptions of support and teacher responsiveness, including being consistent with school rules. This could also be found in our study, where the pupils linked mistrust and school lack of safety with teachers who are not available, non-responsive, and inconsistent. Our findings also show how various aspects of the school climate such as the quality

of relationships, the security provided, and organizational aspects (Wang & Degol, 2016) become important in pupils' help-seeking.

Practical implications

Based on our findings it appears crucial for principals, teachers and schools to pay attention to the organizational support structure. Firstly, it appears imperative to establish caring, responsive and supportive pupil-teacher relationships to build trust and make pupils more confident in and willing to turn to teachers for help and support if they experience unsafe incidents. In addition, it appears important to increase pupils' levels of awareness about various sources of support, especially if teachers are not available at all times. Secondly, the scheduling of teachers to be available as sources of support during breaktimes needs attention. Working with the pupils and asking them to map safe and unsafe places in school could be helpful in increasing teacher availability (cf., Borg, 2023; Langhout & Annear, 2011) and supervision in places where pupils report feeling unsafe (cf., Vaillancourt et al., 2010), in addition to scheduling that ensures a sufficient amount of present and attentive teachers during breaktimes. Thirdly, there is a call for a whole-school approach where all teachers are attentive, consistent and responsive in the provided support and interventions, both when they witness unsafe incidents and when pupils turn to them and tell them about unsafe incidents. In sum, schools need to work on teacher-pupil relationship quality and consider how scheduling, information about support sources, and a consistent and responsive approach from all teachers affects pupils' help-seeking and the building of a supportive school climate and safety for all pupils at school.

Limitations

This is a small-scale qualitative study exploring pupils' perspectives on help-seeking at their schools and might not be representative in other contexts. In addition, we cannot say anything about actions taking place in the real-life setting. Future studies should adopt an ethnographic approach and collect observational data to examine school climate, school safety and help-seeking in terms of how these are enacted, constituted, and performed in everyday school life. Our study has focused on pupils' perspectives and contributes an interpretative portrait of help-seeking and the organizational support structure (Charmaz, 2014). With that said, the findings bring attention to what pupils' view as crucial in relation to help-seeking from teachers in school. As we organized the focus groups based on a random sampling procedure within each school, gender and grade, this might have affected the group dynamics and interactions. The random sampling procedure also made it

possible for some pupils to be included in a focus group at more than one timepoint.

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