

## 7. TEACHER LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE IN CULTIVATING AN ANTI-BULLYING SCHOOL CLIMATE. PERSPECTIVES ON THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM (BY ARTS)

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**Abstract:** *Particular attention is paid to the learning experiences that students benefit from during their time spent in school institutions and the social climate of the student class. Experts from different fields are striving to support an effective instructional process by developing documents regulating school curricula, which aim at holistic personality formation, empowerment and optimal adaptation to a constantly changing society. Although specialists' recommendations support desiderata that refer to the development of healthy attitudes and behaviour aimed at optimizing students well-being and strengthening their sense of belonging to the group, there is little discussion of the hidden curriculum and its role in shaping the behaviour of children and young people. This paper highlights the role of the teacher as a leader of the group of students - able to influence the classroom climate by promoting values and attitudes that foster empathy and social proactivity. We have developed these ideas by particularizing them in relation to the difficulties posed by bullying. Our discourse focused on peer leadership skills aimed at diminishing bullying behavior and ensuring a positive classroom climate. The paper also presents a series of recommendations aimed at useful practices for optimizing teachers' ability to influence by implementing a hidden curriculum that acts as a brake against hostile climate.*

**Keywords:** *teacher leadership, competencies, anti-bullying, school climate, hidden curriculum*

### 1. Introduction

For more than half a century, student safety and ensuring the climate that equates wellbeing in the school environment have become a constant preoccupation for researchers worldwide. While severe physical aggression is rare in the school environment, low-intensity but frequent physical violence among students disrupts and negatively impacts their emotional well-being and academic performance. Bullying continues to be the most common form of violence between students and a significant challenge for educational stakeholders. In the effort to minimize bullying, teachers play a crucial role as they are the ones who must implement school-based prevention programs (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004).

In a meta-analysis conducted by Modecki and colleagues (2014) that included 80 research studies from different corners of the world, bullying was found to have a prevalence of between 34.5% and 36%. Whether positive or negative, school climate is closely related to the emotional, social, physical, civic, and ethical experiences of students and teachers (Acosta et al., 2018). Over the last two decades there have been multiple initiatives by education leaders, policy makers and the community to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms involved in school development. The new vision highlights paideic leadership as a pathway to optimizing the social climate (Murphy, 2005), given the positive influence of

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teaching staff on the hidden curriculum through the informal validation of messages and behavioral practices (Stromquist et al., 1998; Bush, 2007).

Studies show that students who are exposed to high levels of bullying experience a decrease in academic engagement and perform less well in school (Juvonen, Wang & Espinoza, 2011; Okeke, Akobi & Maseli, 2024). Currently, bullying prevention programs are designed from an ecological perspective and focus on influencing the environments in which students interact, i.e., family, school and community. The school is directly involved in eradicating this negative behavior because it has qualified staff with the necessary expertise to respond effectively to the needs of students and to create a safe learning environment. But as some research shows, this is an elusive goal. Even if teachers feel responsible for managing bullying, in everyday educational practice they face major limitations such as lack of institutional support, lack of resources and lack of training for effective anti-bullying interventions (Rosen, Scott & DeOrnellas, 2016).

The importance of professional training to prevent and intervene in bullying incidents is noted. In a systematic review, Panosso, Kienen and de Faria Brino (2023) found that the focus of training courses is on the transmission of knowledge and less on bullying management behaviors. Teachers need to be taught how to behave and how to use anti-bullying strategies. Through specialized professional training, teachers have the opportunity to hone their skills to intervene effectively and create a supportive and safe educational climate for students. Thus, the effectiveness of prevention programs depends on the quality of teacher training (Panosso, Kienen & de Faria Brino, 2023). A teacher performing well in eradicating bullying can positively influence the school by developing as an educational leader.

Despite the fact that schools resort to implementing various anti-bullying programs, the rate of bullying is still quite high. The effectiveness of these programs has not been systematically evaluated, as the results of the evaluation of their impact are often impacted by other variables. Teacher responses are expected to be ineffective rather than effective (Shamsi et al., 2019). Therefore, we do not know which are the most effective teacher professional development strategies in the area of bullying. In this equation, the need for students to learn and grow in a safe school environment based on respect, civic attitudes, and justice remains unquestioned.

The effectiveness of the teacher leader is not only about managing bullying incidents in the school, but also contributes to the social-emotional development of students, implementing educational policies and practices that facilitate communication, healthy social relationships and pay particular attention to the school social-emotional climate by analyzing unintended and unplanned experiences that students have access to. Through this paper we aim to highlight the role of teacher leadership and its importance in preventing bullying by optimizing school climate and hidden curriculum. At the same time, we aim to identify the ways in which leadership competences can be developed in teachers from the perspective of making training programs more effective.

## **2. Hidden curriculum. Implications on the school climate**

The semantics of the term curriculum has evolved in accordance with the lines of thought of notorious theorists who have made contributions to the explanation

and expansion of the concept. The vision of curriculum development from the perspective of learning planning and guidance, initiated by John Dewey, was developed by Bobbitt and perfected by Tyler and Taba. Whether Dewey (1902) makes the difference between the subjects and subjects discussed in the school and the learning experience of the educator, organized by the school, and, Bobbitt (1918) differentiates between two categories of experiences that define the learning process and complements the traditional meaning of the term curriculum: (a) a wide range of direct and indirect experiences, consisting of the unfolding of the individual's abilities and (b) the series of direct and conscious instructional experiences designed by the school to complement and hone the individual's abilities.

It can be seen how the semantics of the term has expanded from knowledge, courses or disciplines, to the entire learning experience of the individual, including how to organize and plan it. The dominance of the interpretations refers to the experiences that are realized under the auspices of the school and are promoters of recognized values connected to the educational ideal adjacent to a society defined as time and space, flexible to the changes made by the major areas that characterize society. This does not mean „that one can totally control school learning experiences, some can be sporadic, unplanned, negative and have consistent effects” (Enache, 2019, p. 15). The indirect experience metaphor represents an anticipation of the contemporary conception that intersects with the meaning of non-formal and informal education, as well as with the recognition of the existence of the curriculum outside the school (Cretu, 1995).

Regarding the derived conceptual categories, two aspects are highlighted that nuance the meaning of the term curriculum. The fact of the curriculum is one of them and refers to the behaviors of the teacher or student and which impact on the reorganization of the learning experience, the, and the second derivative refers to the curricular contents, they indicate any subject of study, educational materials, etc., as well as experiences or situations that constitute cognitive and affective assimilations on the part of the learner. Also, given the meanings associated with the curriculum, it is distinguished in literature in addition to the basic, specialized and informal curriculum and the hidden or latent curriculum. It covers learning experiences that are acquired from the psycho-social and cultural environment of the class or school and allows the integration of several variables such as: learning environment, teacher personality, interpersonal relationships, and, the system of rewards and sanctions (Vallance, 2002). These elements define the educational environment and determine influences on students' self-image, attitudes towards others and shape their own system of values.

The same term has been associated with metaphors such as unwritten or unofficial curriculum and refers to unintended perspectives that students acquire from unplanned learning experiences (Vallance, 1973). These implicit and understandable objectives relate, inter alia, to ways of human interaction, flexibility in terms of tolerance, justice or perceptions of obvious problems in society (Li et al., 2024) And is configured as non-academic consequences, but which are educationally significant in terms of how they affect the sides of the students personality (Stromquist et al., 1998; Blanchard, 1977).

This undeclared status quo, but approved by its practice, acts directly on the

socio-affective dimension of the groups of students by perpetuating values, beliefs, attitudes, attitudes, customs accepted deliberately and systematically by teaching staff and beneficiaries of education and can equate or even exceed as formal impact the official curriculum (Raissi Ahvan et al., 2021). Thus, according to several opinions, the hidden curriculum is closely related to the climate of the class of students. Important elements of the hidden curriculum for class climate modeling are the norms, the quality of interpersonal communication, the marking of important days at the institutional level or at the level of classes of students, students, practices and activities carried out and which consistency and meaning of the social group (Cubukcu, 2012; Giroux & Penna, 1979).

Several authors (Fielding, 1981; Gerbner, 1972) suggested that a factor influencing the social norms and expectations of the class is the teacher. According to the studies (Ruus et al., 2007; Phillips & Clarke, 2012) the system of values and attitudes of teachers towards students significantly determines the feeling of safety and mental well-being of students. As a moral authority and court with a strong formative impact through the transmission of messages, the system of values used in situations of conflict mediation between students, tolerance, acceptance of diversity, promotion of prosocial behaviors civic engagement, etc, empathy or dignity, the teacher determines unwritten standards and validated models that will guide subsequent perceptions and behavioral decisions of students (Cengel & Turkoglu, 2016; Abroampa, 2020; Myles et al., 2024). However, Hashemi et al. (2012) warns that these types of experiences, whether lived as a subject or as an observer by the student, are not projected, rather, the educational environment is a taught content.

### **3. The teacher leadership concept**

The area of educational leadership and educational management has multiple perspectives and the question has been raised whether educational leadership is a distinct field or just a subfield of educational management. More recently, the notion of management is found to overlap with that of leadership, with a major concern in developed countries for the latter. In order to draw a demarcation between management and leadership, Cuban (1988) states that leadership is about change while management is perceived as an activity of resource management and maintenance. In this author's view, organizational functioning involves both dimensions. Leadership involves influencing the actions of others to achieve desirable goals, proposing changes and adjustments to achieve them and even new goals, requiring dynamism, competence and ingenuity. Instead, management involves the effective maintenance of current organizational arrangements. It is true that good management also includes leadership skills, but it is centered more on maintenance than change (Cuban, 1988).

An analysis of educational leadership from the perspective of creating an anti-bullying school climate would better delineate the role of the teacher in this professional role. In a systematic review of empirical studies published between 2003 and 2017, Nguyen, Harris, and Ng (2020) identified various definitions of teacher leadership. After analyzing these definitions, the authors observed that they share four central characteristics:

- Teacher leadership is primarily viewed as a process of influence rather than a formal position of authority. It involves teachers acting as change agents and drivers of innovation.
- It is closely tied to collaboration, whether through structured activities like professional learning community meetings or informal interactions such as sharing experiences and daily conversations, all based on mutual trust, respect, and shared benefits.
- Teacher leaders exert influence at multiple levels, extending beyond classroom teaching to the broader school environment and even the wider educational community.
- Teacher leadership is associated with fostering influence, achieving outcomes, and creating a positive impact.

These findings highlight four essential traits of teacher leadership: it functions as a process of influence, thrives on collaborative and trusting relationships, spans both inside and outside the classroom, and aims to enhance instructional quality, student learning, and school performance.

#### **4. Optimizing teacher leadership competences**

Crowther et al. (2002) view teacher leadership as an action that reconfigures teaching and learning in schools, that welds school and community to learning, and that promotes social sustainability and increased quality of life in the community. Today, teachers are increasingly assuming leadership roles in both instructional and school organization (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders are expected to be those who determine student success in the classroom and those who foster student development. An effective teacher must be a leader for his or her students. In this context, professional training in the direction of leadership skills is also imperative (Warren, 2021).

The path-goal theory of leadership explains how teacher leaders foster student motivation and academic achievement. According to this paradigm, effective leaders apply a specific style or behavior that best suits the environmental factors and their subordinates (Oqvist & Malmstrom, 2016). In this context, teacher leaders use their position to support students in accomplishing academic goals and motivate them. The teacher leader demonstrates flexibility by determining which style or behavior is most suitable to help students achieve their educational objectives (Badiali, 2018).

Through leadership competencies the teacher identifies the style that complements students' abilities and addresses their gaps. In turn, students become motivated, satisfied and effective. Ultimately, the teacher leader guides the students towards achieving the desired outcomes (Danielson, 2006). Some authors have asked what is a teacher's journey to becoming a teacher leader. Lieberman (2006) outlines the ways in which teachers learn to become educational leaders:

- Lifelong learning. Over time, teachers gain more experience and evolve as teacher leaders.
- Engaging in self-reflection on their professional practice, gaining insights from collaborating with experienced colleagues, and critically analyzing their own work to foster continuous learning.

- Reflecting on personal life experiences and teaching methodologies, thereby nurturing a deep and enduring commitment to their students' success.
- Getting out of your comfort zone and experimenting. Teacher leaders learn from their own experience and constantly improve for their students.
- Broadening their body of knowledge through interactions with other peer leaders. Teacher leaders must value collegiality and interactions with colleagues in order to learn from them (Juneja, 2015 apud. Warren, 2021).
- Being sensitive to the context and culture in which the student lives.
- Sharing experiences with students and understanding teaching strategies and curriculum.
- Showing a constant concern for improvement together with colleagues.

The concept of learning by doing is central to understanding teacher leadership. As leaders, teachers are more collaborative, social and form context-dependent competencies. The way of thinking about learning by doing is important in education being known as „reflective practice" (Lieberman, 2008). In the study by Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004) it was found that during bullying prevention support team meetings teachers reported feeling insecure in implementing interventions. Moreover, teachers expressed a desire to see from the workshop leader how they should implement certain bullying prevention policies.

The Olweus Bullying Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) developed support teams designed as a forum to discuss the challenges of bullying, to disseminate experiences and to learn from their successes and failures (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). In fact, OBPP stands out among established prevention programs in the scientific literature as one that emphasizes teacher leadership. Olweus (1993) places teachers as leaders in managing student behavior, developing and implementing anti-bullying policies, creating a safe learning environment, and modeling student behavior. To accomplish these desires Olweus (1993) envisioned and included the professional development of teachers for this role from the perspective of developing leadership competence as an integral part of his program.

## **5. School Climate and Bullying**

Understanding the connection between bullying and school climate requires examining two social theories. Social disorganization theory, proposed by Shaw and McKay, argues that economic challenges and the surrounding social environment reduce a community's capacity (e.g., parents, schools) to monitor and regulate adolescent behavior, leading to the development of delinquent actions (Espelage & Swearer, 2009). Similarly, Hirschi's social control theory posits that delinquent behavior arises when individuals' bonds to society are weak or broken. In other words, when adolescents have fragile relationships with key people and institutions, they are more likely to engage in problematic behaviors (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1998).

A school climate conducive to harmonious student development and optimizing academic performance requires positive and healthy relationships. In the scientific literature in the field of bullying prevention, a positive school climate is considered to be the remedy for bullying among students, and true prevention actually means improving the school atmosphere (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). At the

school level, climate is a primary force that shapes interactions among members of the school community through shared values, beliefs and attitudes that set the norms of conduct in a school (Emmons, 1996; Kuperminc et al., 2001). At the same time, relationships develop in the school environment that need to be mutually supportive for the well-being of students and the quality of the school-family-community partnership (Guhn, 2008).

Fostering strong relationships necessitates dedicating time to building and sustaining connections while creating opportunities for positive interactions (Ben-Avie, 1998). This relational approach may serve as an effective alternative to the implementation of numerous, disconnected prevention programs aimed at addressing bullying (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). Although limited research has specifically explored the interplay between teacher leadership and school climate, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) investigated this connection. Their study examined the relationships among school climate, teacher empowerment, and student empowerment. They discovered that in schools characterized by collegial leadership and highly professional teachers, elevated levels of teacher empowerment contributed to improved student academic performance. Consequently, fostering a positive school climate and ensuring teacher accountability are critical factors in enhancing student achievement.

Van der Sijde (1988) made a differentiation between the atmosphere in a school and the climate in classrooms because they are constructed differently. In schools with a generally positive climate there may be classes with a specific negative climate, just as there may be classes with a positive school climate in a school with a negative environment. Still distinct constructs, easily confused, are the school culture and the school climate. Thus, school culture encompasses shared values, assumptions, ideas and beliefs that give identity to the organization and certain standards regarding expected behaviors (Tableman, 2004), and school climate involves the experiences, emotions of teachers and students towards the school environment. It is seen that the affective dimension of the learning environment influences learning and teaching quality, and student behaviors (Peterson & Skiba apud Kartal & Bilgin, 2009).

Building on the previous idea, studies have shown that a climate that is perceived as one characterized by physical and emotional safety and that indicates well-being is associated with less occurrence of behavioral problems. Moreover, the positive school climate stimulates the school commitment of students given the fact that it covers the need for belonging to the group and for the valorization and appreciation of one's own person (Marchante, et al., 2022). A comparative study by Gee et al. (2022) indicated that the school climate characterized by an authoritarian atmosphere negatively influences the perceptions of students who have been victims of aggression, as students would consider that the disciplinary rules were not fairly applied to the aggressor, thus creating a sense of injustice.

On the other hand, the results showed that a supportive school climate is associated with victims' tendencies to more easily overcome an episode of bullying, as collegial and mentoring social relationships are secured. Zhu and Teng (2022) found that teachers' attitudes influence the social climate in the students' classroom. The results indicated that the rate of negative experiences associated with bullying

was lower in classes where teachers are open to providing emotional and informational support. In addition, the researchers point out that classrooms where teachers promote competition increase the chances of students becoming hostile to one another, compared to classrooms where students report a stronger sense of belonging and feel valued and appreciated.

Therefore, we understand that the values promoted by the teacher influence the social relations at the group level. In agreement with the results obtained by Huang et al. (2024), environments that encourage competition and individualism are predisposing to behaviors characterized by strained social relations and unproductive for the desirable social modeling of young people as well as indicators of a higher rate of repeated aggressive behaviors. A comparative study carried out by Çengel & Türkoglu (2016) who aimed to analyze social relations in classes marked by different school climates observed during teaching for three consecutive days, concluded that in the case of a positive school climate, the behavioral diversity of students is much wider, predominating positive interaction.

On the other hand, among the environment characterized by a negative climate, social interactions during classes were less, and most behaviors were categorized as negative. The researchers explained these findings by arguing the results based on the hidden curriculum theory. Any initiative within the school climate to prevent bullying involves several essential components:

- *Educational leadership*: School leaders must support and lead all effective school reform initiatives, including improving school climate. Their role is not only to act in the direction of preventing bullying, but in achieving and maintaining a supportive, respectful and safe climate for development and learning;
- *Training the whole school community*: creating opportunities for students, parents, school staff and community leaders to participate in the process of improving the school climate as co-learners and co-leaders. At the opposite pole, lack of involvement is the most common cause of failure of school reforms (Fullan, 2011; Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010 apud Cohen & Freiberg, 2013);
- *Assessment*: it is important for measuring progress over time and is carried out at three levels: readiness assessments which are useful for school leaders to understand their level of preparation in initiating a school reform approach and promoting a positive school climate; comprehensive school climate assessments (comprehensive school climate assessments) carried out for the purpose of an independent review of school climate measurement; more specific evaluations of the aggressor-victim-witness interaction through surveys or research done by the students themselves.
- *Policies, laws, regulations and support*: although the legislative system has dedicated a special section to sanctioning the bully and schools have addressed the "zero tolerance" policy of aggression between students, they are ineffective and unproductive in reducing bullying (American Psychological Association, 2006; Fowler, 2011 apud Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). The most effective policies must promote learning and collaboration within the entire school community to build a shared vision of the kind of school desired, and then facilitate the identification of the rules, standards, and support needed to achieve this goal. At the same time, the development of such policies should be in agreement with the results of research on

effective actions in preventing or reducing bullying (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). In schools where interactions between teachers are encouraged, the personal development of teacher leaders is also observed (Gningue, Peach, Jarrah & Wardat, 2022).

After about 50 years since the beginning of Olweus' bullying research we have a good level of understanding of bullying. However, translating the study results into effective practices and policies involves considerable work. The bullying prevention programs developed in the last twenty years have as a common element the creation and development of a school climate that stimulates empathy and mutual support between students. Improving the school climate requires the development of positive and harmonious relationships at the level of the entire school community (Wang, Berry & Swearer, 2013). Considering the consequences of bullying, we notice that it is not limited only to the victim students, but also to the entire school climate (Black & Jackson, 2007) and even the community. All prevention programs from Olweus until now incorporate the concept of school climate in anti-bullying strategies.

## **6. Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of teachers' leadership in cultivating an anti-bullying school climate. Thus, we focused on the impact of bullying in terms of students' academic performance and the role of teachers in creating and maintaining a positive school climate. We then looked at the concept of the hidden curriculum and its importance in creating a safe learning environment. Through daily interactions with students, through the norms and practices promoted and the quality of interpersonal communication, teachers transmit values and attitudes that shape students' behaviors. Also, the hidden curriculum is directly related to the classroom climate, having a similar or even stronger formative impact than the official curriculum.

Teacher leadership competence is essential for the formation of adaptive behaviors. Teacher leaders bring significant changes to the school organization, both within formal educational activities and in the creation of a sustainable, inclusive and cohesive school community. In the last section we discussed the importance of a positive school climate in preventing bullying and academic success. A learning environment based on respect, trust and safety has the power to decrease bullying and increase student achievement.

In the light of what has been presented, certain measures can be highlighted that can optimize the leadership skills of teachers and that can favor the cultivation of a positive school climate: a) rethinking of continuous professional training programs with an emphasis on the development of leadership skills in teachers, on the cultivation and maintenance of a positive climate school; b) creation of open and diversified communication channels between teachers, students and parents and opportunities for involvement in improving the school climate; c) addressing the hidden curriculum by establishing norms and practices that promote values such as empathy, solidarity, respect; d) increasing teachers' awareness of the impact of these values on the socio-emotional education of students. e) didactic planning through the integration of group educational activities that support class cohesion; f) constant

monitoring and evaluation of the school climate through the involvement of students and parents as a way of early identification of possible problems and preventive intervention.

We believe that the recommendations elaborated above represent measures by which teachers can strengthen their role as teachers' leadership, by developing the potential to positively impact the hidden curriculum, respectively the school climate at the expense of preventing bullying.

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