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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What Explains the Perception of Having Shared Practices Among School Staff for Anti-bullying Work?

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Abstract

A comprehensive, whole-school approach that demands commitment from all staff members is a recommended basis for effective and systematic anti-bullying work. Central to this approach is the collective agreement among school staff on the implementation of specific practices. This survey study investigates the extent to which Finnish basic education (grades 1–9) school staff ($n \sim 400$) perceive that they have shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices in their school and the factors explaining variation in these perceptions. While staff generally reported having shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices, variation was observed both within and between schools. Professional role, school size, perception of well-being values at school, leadership promoting well-being, and utilization of manualized program explained the variation in the perception of shared practices in the random intercept model. Qualitative analyses supplemented the quantitative findings, indicating that having a specific named program—either a manualized program or a self-developed one—was associated with the perception of shared and actively used practices, emphasizing the necessity for a structured approach. Our results underscore individual and contextual factors fostering a collective understanding of bullying prevention and intervention. Achieving such consensus is essential but not always achieved, posing a risk for ineffective bullying prevention efforts in schools.

Keywords Bullying · Anti-bullying work · Intervention · Prevention · School

School bullying has been under extensive research for decades (Smith et al., 2021). Research has shown the serious, in some cases even lifetime, negative consequences for bullying victims (e.g., Brendgen & Poulin, 2018; deLara, 2019; Sourander et al., 2016; Wolke & Lereya, 2015) and distress, anxiety, and depression among bystanders witnessing bullying (Midgett & Doumas, 2019; Rivers & Noret, 2013; Rivers et al., 2009). The consequences can also be harmful to the ones involved in perpetrating peers (Ttofi et al., 2011, 2016).

School is one of the most important contexts to prevent and end the vicious cycle of bullying and its potential consequences. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of teachers' anti-bullying attitudes, efforts, and systematic implementation of anti-bullying practices (Haataja et al., 2014; Saarento et al., 2013; Serdiouk et al., 2015; Veenstra et al., 2014). However, a single teacher—no matter how capable, willing, and competent—is not able to take alone the responsibility of preventing bullying. Hence, adopting a whole-school approach provides a solid foundation for anti-bullying efforts (Cantone et al., 2015; Espelage, 2014; Gaffney et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 2022; Valle et al., 2020). This requires commitment from the entire school staff and interdisciplinary collaboration among various professionals, and importantly, the designated anti-bullying practices should be agreed upon and shared within the school. If the staff members are not aware of or do not agree on how to

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prevent and intervene in bullying, it is likely that chosen practices are not implemented, will not be sustained, and eventually fail to produce the desired effects (Olweus et al., 2020). Although an increasing number of studies have examined factors that facilitate the implementation and sustainment of whole-school anti-bullying programs (Herkama et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022; Sainio et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021), there is little understanding of within-school commitment and consensus on anti-bullying practices.

In the present study, we focus on the *perceptions of shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices* within the school. Using comprehensive data from the entire school staff, we examine both individual (gender, work experience, professional role) and contextual (school size and type, perceived school values, resources, leadership, and use of anti-bullying program) factors potentially explaining school staff members' perceptions of having shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices in their school. The findings guide schools to focus on factors that contribute to the development of effective whole-school anti-bullying practices.

Shared Anti-bullying Practices as the Basis for Whole-School Anti-bullying Work

The reasoning behind advocating for the whole-school approach in bullying prevention stems from both the nature of bullying and the conclusions drawn from studies on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs. Bullying is a complex problem, thus also the strategies for prevention and intervention should be systemic (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Accordingly, the whole-school approach typically means that the whole school community is involved in anti-bullying practices (Gaffney et al., 2021). This involves shared school ethos and policies along with coordinated activities and collaboration across disciplines (Goldberg et al., 2019) and often is distinguished from interventions that target only bullies and victims, or which are only classroom-based (Cantone et al., 2015). Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs have implied that a whole-school approach is associated with greater effectiveness in comparison to programs that were not whole-school based or were classroom-based only (Cantone et al., 2015; Gaffney et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Naturally, merely having a whole-school approach is not the key to success, but the practices need to be actively and systematically implemented across the school and with continued effort (Huitsing et al., 2019; Johander et al., 2021; Olweus et al., 2020; Sainio et al., 2020). Such systematic and sustained anti-bullying work requires that most school staff is aware of the chosen anti-bullying practices and principles (Herkama et al., 2022). Commitment, staff buy-in, and ownership of the chosen practices have been referred to as crucial factors for program implementation and maintenance, and lack of commitment is one of the main barriers to program implementation (Andreou et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Leadbeater et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021). In addition, coordination and communication among all staff members are crucial for maintaining a multicomponent whole-school anti-bullying program (Sainio et al., 2020). Importantly, shared practices, where the responsibilities can be rotated among staff, can help mitigate the negative impact of staff turnover on the program's implementation (Andreou et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Leadbeater et al., 2015). This ensures that the program's practices are successfully integrated into daily school life, regardless of personnel changes (Herkama et al., 2022).

Overall, we believe that *shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices* form a firm foundation upon which effective anti-bullying efforts are built. It does not guarantee effectiveness, but based on qualitative studies, represents a crucial cornerstone for whole-school anti-bullying work facilitating implementation and sustainment (Herkama et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021). Our conceptualization of the perception of shared and actively implemented practices resembles the concept of perceived descriptive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). Rather than representing a factual aspect of the school's operating culture, it reflects a subjective evaluation of the extent to which the anti-bullying practices are agreed upon and implemented. Staff perception of shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices can also serve as a proxy for active program implementation. Importantly, by considering all staff members perceptions concerning the shared practices and their enactment, it is possible to capture both the level (high versus low) and the variation (high consensus versus low consensus) of the fundamental base of anti-bullying work at school—namely the vision of what needs to be done and to which extent this is taking place at school. Nevertheless, there is not much research on how school staff perceive the school's anti-bullying effort, the variation in these perceptions, or the factors contributing to such perceptions.

Individual and Contextual Factors Associated with Shared Practices

Previous studies have examined factors influencing the implementation and sustainment of anti-bullying programs (Cook et al., 2017; Coyle, 2008; Haataja et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Pearce et al., 2022; Sainio et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021; Swift et al., 2017) or investigated factors associated with

individual teachers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and intentions to intervene in bullying (see for systematic review van Aalst et al., 2022). Broadly speaking, these factors can be divided into individual and contextual, and when studies are conducted in a context of specific programs, also program-related factors (such as feasibility and flexibility) have been identified as being important (e.g., Coyle, 2008; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Herkama et al., 2022).

An array of factors at the individual level, such as teachers' knowledge and skills, attitudes, affects, beliefs, self-efficacy, and burnout, have been associated with program implementation or intention to intervene in bullying cases (Cecil & Molnar-Main, 2015; Haataja et al., 2015; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Swift et al., 2017; van Aalst et al., 2022). Importantly, such studies have mainly concentrated on teachers, but the perspective of other professionals has rarely been taken into account. However, professional role in the school may explain the possible within-school variation in staff member's perceptions of the school's anti-bullying practices as some roles at school are related to stronger involvement in planning and decision-making (e.g., principals, staff members responsible for coordinating anti-bullying work) or program delivery (e.g., classroom teachers), which can be related to heightened awareness of chosen practices (Cecil & Molnar-Main, 2015; Haataja et al., 2015; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; van Aalst et al., 2022).

Turning to contextual factors, an increasing number of studies have stressed the importance of contextual factors influencing program implementation and sustainability as well as teachers' responses to bullying (Herkama et al., 2022; Kollerová et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 2022; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Sainio et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021). First, shared values, schools' vision, and strategic goals should be in line with the chosen practices to support the implementation and sustainment of the practices (Herkama et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022). Putting effort into anti-bullying work may positively influence everyday life at school, as teacher interviews indicated (Herkama et al., 2022); at best, bullying prevention can increase the well-being of students, result in better-functioning classrooms, and increase trust. Values supporting anti-bullying work may be related specifically to anti-bullying work (Herkama et al., 2022; Midthassel & Ertesvåg, 2008), or more broadly to supporting students' well-being (Herkama et al., 2022). Such values function as the guideline to allocate resources to bullying prevention. Second, resources are mentioned as a crucial factor in the implementation of anti-bullying practices (Herkama et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021). There needs to be enough staff and funding for anti-bullying work, but perhaps most importantly, time to plan and implement the practices.

Third, leadership has been viewed as a crucial factor in facilitating the implementation and sustainment of anti-bullying practices (Ahtola et al., 2013; Andreou et al., 2015; Haataja et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Midthassel & Ertesvåg, 2008; Pearce et al., 2022; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2021). School principals may influence the school community functioning directly (e.g., call for action, set goals), or as Reyes-Rodrígues and colleagues (2021) found, through organizational climate. In the context of shared practices, this could mean, for instance, the promotion of values and commitment among staff and the allocation of resources to the priorities.

Accordingly, values, resources, and leadership supporting bullying prevention are likely essential drivers for shared and actively used anti-bullying practices in the school. While leadership has stood out both in quantitative and qualitative research on bullying prevention (Ahtola et al., 2013; Haataja et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021), studies on values and resources are predominantly qualitative. Moreover, it is important to study these contextual factors jointly to understand their unique potential in creating shared anti-bullying practices and anti-bullying culture in the school.

In addition, few studies have examined how school demographic factors are related to program sustainment. In these studies, larger schools were more likely to sustain the program compared to small schools, whereas the findings related to school type (primary, lower secondary, or combined) were mixed (McIntosh et al., 2016; Sainio et al., 2020). These factors are important to consider in explaining to what degree the anti-bullying practices are shared and actively used. Large schools may pose challenges for implementing shared practices, but it is also conceivable that in such a setting, a systematic whole-school approach is seen as necessary, and consequently enforced more frequently. Moreover, large schools may have more resources for bullying prevention or be equipped with different or more versatile leadership roles.

In this study, we additionally consider the added value of having an anti-bullying program in the creation of shared anti-bullying practices. Several evidence-based and manualized anti-bullying programs are available to accomplish anti-bullying work (Gaffney et al., 2019; Valle et al., 2020). However, schools may have self-developed their approach or followed school district or municipality-level guidance to meet the needs of current legislative and practical needs. Although manualized programs are acknowledged as effective in reducing bullying (Gaffney et al., 2019, 2021), studies have seldom explored the role of a manualized anti-bullying program in facilitating the implementation of anti-bullying practices. Using a manualized program may be costly, but if the program is evidence-based, it can eventually be cost-effective (Persson et al., 2018). It is more than likely that a chosen program can guide the anti-bullying work providing a systematic structure and clear steps for actions, as well

as serve as an educational tool for staff regarding bullying prevention (Herkama et al., 2022; Sainio et al., 2019). Therefore, using a manualized program can facilitate the creation of shared practices and thus be related to the perceptions of shared and actively used practices in comparison to schools not using a manualized program.

Study Aims

This study aims to identify and raise awareness of individual and contextual factors that support the creation of *shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices* in primary school. We assess school staff's perceptions of shared practices and analyze variations within and across schools. More precisely, we examine how individual factors, such as gender, work experience, professional role, and contextual factors, including school size and type, school values, available resources, and leadership, as well as the use of manualized programs, explain these perceptions.

We hypothesize that staff with more work experience and those in key roles in planning and enacting the practices are likely to report higher evaluations on having shared practices in the school. Moreover, we posit that a well-resourced environment, strong well-being values, leadership promoting well-being, and the use of structured programs foster a shared anti-bullying culture. We also take into account school size and type as these have previously been found to be related to program implementation (McIntosh et al., 2016; Sainio et al., 2020) and thus may also be related to the creation of shared culture. Our study will additionally provide qualitative insights on which bullying prevention programs are employed, how utilization of these programs or practices is perceived by the staff, and whether these perceptions are associated with shared, actively implemented practices.

Methods

Study Context

This study is part of a research project (Sainio & Hämeenaho, 2019-2020) that aims to understand factors constituting communal well-being work in schools. In the project school, anti-bullying work was one domain of interest. In Finland, anti-bullying work is legislatively regulated and guided by the National Core Curriculum (Basic Education Act, 1998; Student Welfare Act, 2013; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Schools are mandated to create a plan to prevent bullying and address acute cases of bullying, put it into action, and follow adherence to the plan. Recently, the Finnish Educational Evaluation Center evaluated the sustainability of seven widely used bullying prevention programs and practices in Finland (Rumpu et al., 2023). The most widespread evidence-based program identified was the KiVa anti-bullying program developed and spread nationwide in Finland with governmental funding (see, e.g., Sainio et al., 2019; Salmivalli et al., 2013). At its best, 90% of Finnish basic education schools were registered program users, and currently about 40%. As evidenced by the national evaluation (Rumpu et al., 2023), KiVa is still the most widespread whole-school anti-bullying program. We nevertheless explore what other programs are being utilized and to which extent schools are using programs or practises that are self-developed.

Recruitment

The data used in the study was collected in Central Finland in January–February 2020 in schools providing basic education (grades 1–9). First, we contacted the educational administration in 23 municipalities to ask for research permissions. Second, we contacted the school principals in 13 municipalities that had received permission to participate. Third, if they agreed to participate, we sent the survey link to be delivered to staff. Responding was voluntary, based on informed consent, and the participants were given detailed information on the study aims as well as data handling procedures. In addition, respondents were informed that the school would receive a report from survey results if the respondent rate allowed anonymity. The survey contained several measures related to well-being work and staff well-being. The anonymized data is available at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (Sainio & Hämeenaho, 2020). We followed the recommendations of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019).

Study Participants

A total of 437 school staff members from 47 schools responded to the survey. Responses from about 400 respondents from 45 schools were used in the analyses due to missing responses in the core measures. The participating schools were from both urban and rural areas with an average school size being 424 students ($SD = 235$). The number of staff responses from each school ranged from 1 to 35.

Most respondents were teachers (65.2%: 31.4% classroom teachers, 23.6% subject teachers, 9.4% special education teachers), 17.4% were teaching assistants, and 5.7% were principals. The rest (11.7%) consisted of various school professionals (e.g., school secretaries, cleaning and food services staff, school psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors). Among respondents, 47.7% worked in combined primary and lower secondary schools (grades

1–9, ages 7–15), 37.2% in primary schools (grades 1–6), and 15.2% in lower secondary schools (grades 7–9). Almost 80% of the respondents were women. Nine respondents did not provide gender information either by responding "I prefer not to answer" or leaving the response empty.

Measures

Having shared anti-bullying practices was utilized in the analyses as an outcome measure. School staff responded to two statements: "We have shared and actively implemented practices in place for (1) bullying prevention and (2) bullying intervention" (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). We coded the *I don't know* responses ($n = 11$) as missing. The Cronbach's α of the two-item scale was 0.78.

Individual measures were asked at the beginning of the survey. For gender, respondents could choose 0 = *woman*, 1 = *man*, *other* (no responses), or *I prefer not to answer* ($n = 7$, coded as missing), and for work experience in the specific school, 1 = *less than a year*, 2 = *1–2 years*, 3 = *3–4 years*, 4 = *5–10 years*, 5 = *10–15 years*, or 6 = *over 15 years*. For the professional role, a list of different roles in the school was provided to choose from. The roles with only a few respondents were grouped as *other roles*. Moreover, for the final analyses, we combined the teacher roles (class teacher, subject teacher, and special education teacher) to simplify the model.

The contextual measures of school type (a primary school, a lower secondary school, or combined) and size were added to the data set based on separate inquiries (e.g., contacting the principal if needed). *Perceived values for well-being* were asked by three items: (1) "The well-being of the students has been elevated as the most important value in our school," (2) "Our school has clear goals for promoting the well-being of students," (3) "Investing in well-being is visible in our school's daily routines" (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). Cronbach's α was 0.81.

Perception of time resources available for improving students' well-being was asked by two items: (1) "The staff has sufficient time to plan and implement activities that promote the well-being of the students" (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*) and (2) "To what extent do the following factors hinder the implementation of well-being work in your school? Lack of time and busy schedule" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *much*). Cronbach's α was 0.64.

Leadership promoting well-being was asked by two items: (1) "The school leadership provides much support for the work related to promoting the well-being of students" and (2) "To what extent do the following factors hinder the implementation of well-being work in your school? Aspects related to leadership" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *much*). Cronbach's α was 0.62.

The use of a whole-school anti-bullying program was surveyed by asking the respondents to evaluate to what extent certain programs were used in their school. The list was based on national reports and guides on bullying prevention (Elo & Lamberg, 2018; Laitinen et al., 2020). The respondents specified for each program whether it was used in the school 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *partly*, 4 = *systematically*, or responded *I don't know* ($n = 64$, coded as missing). As the KiVa anti-bullying program was the only multicomponent evidence-based program used in the schools, we used only responses on the usage of KiVa. Other programs in the list were not used at all (or very little) or were not whole-school anti-bullying programs.

The respondents were also allowed to specify in open-ended responses if other programs were used. Moreover, respondents often brought up anti-bullying programs or practices used in their school in other open-ended responses ("Describe briefly how the well-being of students is promoted at your school?"; "How would you wish to develop well-being work at your school?"). These open-ended responses were used to gain qualitative insights into the anti-bullying practices used in the schools.

Analyses

We first calculated the descriptive statistics (frequencies, or means and standard deviations), intraclass correlations, and the correlations among the measures. Then, we analyzed how individual and contextual factors explained the variations in the perception of shared anti-bullying practices. To account for nested data, we applied random intercept models using the "lme4" multilevel modeling package in R (Bates et al., 2015).

In the random intercept model, the individual (gender, work experience, and professional role) and school-level background measures (school size and type) were added to the model at the first step. In the second step, all contextual measures evaluated by the staff (values, resources, leadership, and use of the manualized program) were added. We relied on a correlated random effect modeling approach (Antonakis et al., 2021): The explanatory measures were entered as both individual and contextual (school average) level predictors. However, the final models are provided with only statistically significant contextual effects to simplify the model. Moreover, as the program use had a large number of *I don't know* responses ($n = 64$), which we coded as missing, we ran the analyses both with only the school average of the responses ($n = 394$) and with both individual and contextual effects included ($n = 343$). As the results were essentially similar, we reported the latter model with both effects included given they were statistically significant. We also ran additional analyses (not reported) to check whether the I don't know responses in the outcome variable and

program use were related with other measures and whether the large number of I don't know responses in program use explains the responses in shared anti-bullying practices. The correlations were weak, and the effect was not statistically significant; thus, we report the more parsimonious model without additions.

As there was only one whole-school anti-bullying program used in the quantitative measures, we additionally examined the open-ended responses employing thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore if other anti-bullying programs or practices were mentioned and examined whether these responses were related to the perception of shared practices. First, we identified all responses that included references to anti-bullying work or programs. Second, we coded the data into three distinct categories: (1) uses the KiVa program, (2) uses a self-developed model, and (3) no clear model is mentioned or specified. Third, we used the numeric data on the KiVa program use to validate and supplement the coding. As regards validation, all schools in which KiVa was mentioned in open-ended responses indicated using KiVa partly or systematically in quantitative data (school average > 3.5 on KiVa program use), except for one. In this school, KiVa was mentioned by one participant, but the average evaluation in the school on using KiVa was 2.7. This school was left out of the analysis. Moreover, to supplement the coding, we utilized numerical data as information to classify schools as "uses the KiVa program" in instances where the average score for KiVa program usage at the school exceeded 3.5 in the quantitative data (i.e., as respondents had already specified the program use, thus likely without need to clarify other programs or practices used). Finally, we explored how these three codes were related to school mean perception of shared anti-bullying practices.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

As seen in Table 1, school staff generally rated the presence of shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices favorably, but there was also variation in the responses. The intraclass correlation implied some between-school variance (13.9%, Table 1), however, leaving most variance in responses to be explained by individual differences within the school. The explanatory measures, perceived values for and leadership promoting well-being, were also evaluated relatively high, although not as high as the shared anti-bullying practices. The perception of time resources, in turn, was evaluated somewhat lower (between agree and disagree). Also, these evaluations tended to have some between-school variance (18–24%) with most variance found within schools. Staff responded on average "partly agree" on using the KiVa program. As the intraclass correlation demonstrates, 53.5% of its variance could be explained by differences between the schools. This is natural as the program use should be a school-level decision, and not all schools are using it.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and intraclass correlations (ICC)

Measure	*M*	SD	ICC	*n*
Perception of shared anti-bullying practices	4.22	0.87	.139	421
Gender				429
Women	80.4%			
Men	16.6%			
Work experience	4.82	1.35		
Professional role				431
Teacher	64.3%			
Teaching assistant	17.4%			
Principal	5.7%			
Other	11.2%			
School type				428
Primary school	36.4%			
Lower secondary school	14.9%			
Combined primary and lower secondary school	46.7%			
School size	396.86	226.56		428
Perception of values for well-being	3.38	0.83	.180	428
Perception of time resources for well-being	2.47	0.85	.176	436
Perception of leadership promoting well-being	3.73	0.90	.240	432
Use of KiVa program	2.80	1.23	.535	366

Note. All ICC values $p < .001$

Shared anti-bullying practices correlated the highest with the perception of well-being values followed by the perception of leadership promoting well-being and the use of the KiVa program (Table 2). The correlation with the perception of time resources was weak. The individual background measures, gender (men), and work experience were also positively but weakly correlated with shared anti-bullying practices. School size, in turn, was not related to shared anti-bullying practices, but weakly negatively to the perception of well-being values, resources, and leadership. The correlations among the explanatory contextual evaluations, perceptions of values, resources, and leadership were relatively high (0.43–0.63, Table 2), but the use of the KiVa program was weakly or not correlated with other explanatory measures.

Explaining the Perceptions of Having Shared and Actively Used Anti-bullying Practices

The results from the random intercept models are shown in Table 3. As regards the individual factors, only the professional role was statistically significantly related to the perception of shared anti-bullying practices. The effect for principals was the highest followed by the effect for teachers:

Table 2 Correlations between the explanatory measures ($n = 360–432$)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Shared practices							
2 Gender (man = 1)	.13**						
3 Work experience	.11*	.04					
4 School size	.01	−.01	−.02				
5 Perception of values	.41***	.09	−.05	−.19***			
6 Perception of time resources	.16**	.05	−.15**	−.21***	.52***		
7 Perception of leadership	.31***	.05	−.08	−.17**	.62***	.43***	
8 Use of program (KiVa)	.34***	.04	−.02	−.03	.11*	.11*	.06

*$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$

Table 3 Models explaining the perception of shared practices in anti-bullying work

Measure	1 ($n = 401$) *Est. (SE)*	*p*-value	2 ($n = 343$) *Est. (SE)*	*p*-value
Intercept	3.74 (0.21)	< .001	1.17 (0.31)	< .001
Gender (man = 1)	0.18 (0.11)	.104	0.06 (0.11)	.542
Work experience	0.04 (0.03)	.212	0.04 (0.03)	.213
Role: Teacher	0.26 (0.12)	.031	0.23 (0.12)	.055
Role: Principal	0.62 (0.22)	.004	0.48 (0.20)	.016
Role: Other	0.26 (0.16)	.103	0.04 (0.17)	.831
School type (lower secondary)	−0.01 (0.23)	.974	−0.27 (0.14)	.076
School type (combined)	−0.18 (0.16)	.274	−0.18 (0.10)	.098
School size	0.02 (0.03)	.641	0.08 (0.02)	.001
Perception of values			0.37 (0.06)	< .001
Perception of time resources			−0.09 (0.06)	.103
Perception of leadership			0.16 (0.06)	.007
Use of program			0.16 (0.05)	< .001
Use of program (school mean)			0.15 (0.07)	.025
Random effects				
School intercept (*SD*)	0.33		0.11	
Error term (*SD*)	0.79		0.69	
Pseudo-R^2 (fixed effects)	0.06		0.37	
Pseudo-R^2 (total)	0.20		0.38	
ICC	.15		0.03	

Note: Teaching assistants serve as the reference group for the professional role, and primary school for the school type. We run the model additionally without the individual level perception of program use to check whether the increase in sample size to 391 in the final model makes a difference, but the results were essentially similar results in all measures

Compared to teaching assistants, the principals and teachers tended to report more shared anti-bullying practices.

At the contextual level, school size and school type were significant positive explanatory measures in the final model: Perception of shared anti-bullying practices was higher in larger schools and in primary schools in comparison to lower secondary and combined schools. Perceptions of well-being values, leadership promoting well-being, and the use of the KiVa program were positively related to the perception of having shared anti-bullying practices, whereas the perception of resources was statistically non-significant. Only the use of the KiVa program was statistically significant both at the individual and contextual level. This means that the perception of the use of KiVa was related to evaluations on shared anti-bullying practices within the school, but also, regardless of individuals' perception of program use, other staff members' evaluations of the use of the program increased individual's evaluation on shared practices. The same did not apply to the perceptions of values and leadership, which were relevant explanatory measures only at the individual level, nor resources, which effect was not statistically significant. To simplify the models (Table 3), we provide the model without the non-significant contextual-level measures.

Qualitative Analyses

Both schools using KiVa and those describing having self-developed models had relatively high ratings on shared practices (Table 4). As the examples in Table 4 demonstrate, the existence of a bullying prevention model (KiVa or self-developed) was expressed as an important guideline for work, but also challenges were mentioned (e.g., lack of time for joint planning and uneven commitment by staff to anti-bullying work). One respondent stated that abandonment of a manualized program deteriorated the practices, but most comments on the self-developed model were expressed in a positive tone.

The group of schools that did not specify any bullying prevention model was the most heterogeneous in their evaluations of having shared anti-bullying practices (ranging from 1.5 to 5). Overall, the responses were scarce and short, yet mostly positive. Nevertheless, these schools had lower mean evaluations on shared practices.

Discussion

A whole-school approach with school staff involvement and commitment is a recommended base for effective anti-bullying work (Cantone et al., 2015; Gaffney et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Accordingly, there needs to be a shared understanding of the chosen practices within the school, and these practices should be actively implemented. In this study, school staff from 45 Finnish schools evaluated on average favorably as having shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices. However, the responses varied both within and between schools, and both individual and contextual factors explained the variation in the responses.

Among the examined individual factors (gender, work experience, professional role), only professional role was related to the perception of the school actively implementing shared anti-bullying practices. More precisely,

Table 4 Qualitative categorization of the open-ended responses with school mean evaluations on shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices and example response related to anti-bullying work

Type	*n*	Shared practices	Example responses on anti-bullying work
Uses the KiVa program	20	$M = 4.54$	I see the promotion of collective well-being as a prerequisite for consistent and clear operating models that are easy for all staff to commit to, as well as preventive work (Teacher, ID101) The KiVa team has been quite burdened during the past academic year, but the KiVa lessons are not being implemented as planned due to lack of time (they should be alongside classroom teacher lessons). Especially the social skills of 7th graders are weak and lead to bullying situations. There is not enough time to intervene proactively, so the KiVa team is dealing with relationship problems afterwards (Teacher, ID75)
Uses a self-developed model	7	$M = 4.31$	An "own operating model" has been developed to investigate serious bullying and violence situations. With the model, it has been possible to clarify the relationship between different parties in bullying and violence situations so that everyone has been heard (Principal, ID368) Previously, we were part of the KiVa system, which also involved theme lessons for seventh graders. Now anti-bullying practices are the responsibility of our own team and, frankly, they are in a sorry state (Teacher, ID424)
No model specified	20	$M = 3.73$	School bullying is addressed very promptly (Teaching assistant, ID256) Individual and peer group problems are being addressed in a multidisciplinary manner, more or less promptly (Other, ID419)

principals tended to have the highest perception, and both principals' and teachers' evaluations were higher than those of the teaching assistants. Although teaching assistants in Finland do not have pedagogical responsibility, they play an important role in students' peer relations both within and outside the classroom (Paju et al., 2022). Such a role is highly valuable in bullying prevention and intervention. Consequently, a clear conclusion from our study is to include teaching assistants more strongly in anti-bullying work from the initial steps of planning to the full enactment of these plans. Moreover, as previous studies have mainly focused on teachers as implementers of anti-bullying practices (Cecil & Molnar-Main, 2015; Haataja et al., 2015; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; van Aalst et al., 2022), our study gives an important message to extend research on anti-bullying work also to other professional roles than teachers.

Turning to contextual factors, school size was to some extent related to the perception of having shared anti-bullying practices. Staff members in larger schools tended to have higher evaluations on having shared anti-bullying practices This finding is in line with studies on whole-school program sustainability (McIntosh et al., 2016; Sainio et al., 2020). Although intuitively, we could expect that shared practices are created more easily in small schools, it is possible that in large schools, creating shared practices is considered more important and, consequently, anti-bullying work is less often left to individual staff members. However, the effect of school size was small and statistically significant only when other factors were considered; thus, we cannot warrant for generalizations in this regard.

Our main interest was in the contextual factors related to school culture, which we expected to be related to shared anti-bullying practices based on previous studies on program implementation (Ahtola et al., 2013; Andreou et al., 2015; Haataja et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Midthassel & Ertesvåg, 2008; Pearce et al., 2022; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Perceived values for and leadership promoting well-being, as well as the use of a manualized program, were indeed related to perceptions of shared anti-bullying practices, whereas evaluation of resources available for improving students' well-being was not when other factors were considered. Lack of resources was, however, expressed in the open-ended responses as a hindering factor related to the implementation of practices, and its importance has been stressed in previous studies (Herkama et al., 2022). The effect of resources is likely explained by the values and leadership; resources are needed to implement anti-bullying practices, but perhaps more important is what is prioritized with the available resources. Moreover, implementing shared practices can eventually save resources when staff have a clear understanding of expectations of how to prevent and intervene in bullying.

Having a manualized KiVa anti-bullying program was related to a higher perception of shared practices both at the individual and school levels. Thus, the perception of shared practices varied as a function of having a manualized program in the schools, but there were also individual differences within schools in the responses about having a manualized program, and this individual variation was also associated with the perception of having shared practices. This could mean that regardless of individual staff members' awareness of the program use, the anti-bullying work may appear systematic when a program is used. The program use explained a large proportion of the between-school variation in the responses. Thus, as found in previous qualitative studies (Herkama et al., 2022; Sainio et al., 2019), a program can guide the anti-bullying work and facilitate the creation of shared practices. Considering that the KiVa program was the only evidence-based multicomponent whole-school program identified in our sample, further research in different contexts is essential to generalize the findings to other programs.

The qualitative analyses further supported the finding that manualized program use is related to shared and actively used anti-bullying practices. However, also, the small number of schools that clearly expressed having a self-developed bullying prevention model evaluated shared practices as relatively high. We believe that the self-developed model requires dedication and has the benefit of considering the special features of the school. Such work can thus lead to a whole-school program with high staff commitment. Indeed, staff buy-in or ownership is seen as essential for the sustained implementation of practices (Andreou et al., 2015; Herkama et al., 2022; Leadbeater et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021), which can be well reached also by inventing a bullying prevention practice in the school. But, although such a model would be well-adopted and sustained, there is no evidence that it reduces bullying. The efficacy and effectiveness of such approaches warrant more examination. Otherwise, schools may develop and maintain practices that are not effective or even harmful which may cause human suffering and loss of resources. It is clear, however, that the schools in our sample that had self-developed their anti-bullying practices had developed them based on the experiences they had with the KiVa program, which was nationally used for a long period. Thus, the self-developed models may involve evidence-based elements. However, qualitative results also implied that not all schools managed to build their practices after abandoning the KiVa program. More research is needed to understand how schools succeed in creating and maintaining high-quality anti-bullying practices without a manualized anti-bullying program.

Study Strengths, Limitations, and Future Studies

Our study has several strengths. First, we examined an outcome measure—shared and actively used anti-bullying practices—seldom, if ever, previously investigated in relation to anti-bullying work. Second, including whole-school staff in data collection sheds light on the overlooked perspective of other school staff than teachers. Third, we conducted a quantitative analysis of contextual factors—values, resources, and leadership—in relation to anti-bullying work that has previously been brought up predominantly in qualitative studies (e.g., Herkama et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021). Finally, we supplemented the quantitative results with qualitative insights to validate and deepen the understanding of the results.

The evident limitations are cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reports, and consequently subjective evaluations, restriction to Central Finland with a limited number of respondents and schools, varying response rates from different schools, and fairly low Cronbach alphas in some measures. It is also possible that the outcome measure, shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices, was understood differently as the concept is fairly new, and no precise definition was given in the survey. Also, we had no information on the fidelity of program use. These limitations should be considered, and accordingly, the results should be interpreted and generalized cautiously. Moreover, the qualitative analysis was an explorative post hoc analysis that should be considered supplementary information, not as its own analyses. Especially, we likely missed information on the group of schools without specified practices or programs, as anti-bullying practices were not the main topic of the open-ended responses (i.e., no response does not necessarily mean that they do not have a model).

The holistic approach in this study opened several ideas for further studies. First, future studies are needed to evaluate the role of shared and actively implemented practices in relation to more objectively measured implementation and effectiveness of the practices to decrease bullying. Second, as this study implied variation in the perception of shared practices both within the school and between schools, it would be important to examine more in-depth how the level of perceptions and consensus are related to the implementation and effectiveness of the practices. Possibly, both high levels and high consensus are independently important for high-quality anti-bullying work. Moreover, several other factors not measured in this study could additionally explain variation in shared practices (e.g., socioeconomic status of the school or anti-bullying education available for the staff). Third, more understanding is needed of self-developed anti-bullying practices and their effectiveness, implementation, and sustainment. Although we cautiously concluded that self-developed anti-bullying practices may be useful as regards shared practices, these models should be studied in more detail to understand their strengths and potential weaknesses, and for instance, whether previous familiarity to a manualized program is necessary for creating feasible and effective practices. Fourth, as we found differences among professional groups in perceptions of shared practices, this finding deserves further studies with also other professional groups examined in more detail.

Implications

The findings of this study guide schools to focus on both individual and contextual factors that contribute to the development of effective whole-school anti-bullying practices. First, more focus is needed to include the whole school staff with its various professional groups in anti-bullying work. Especially, teaching assistants, who can be in a crucial role in preventing and detecting bullying, need to be trained and more strongly involved in anti-bullying work. Second, high emphasis on well-being values and leadership promoting well-being seem to be important building blocks towards shared and actively implemented anti-bullying practices. Finally, a structured approach is needed for schools to build shared anti-bullying practices.

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Author Contribution Miia Sainio was responsible for conceptualization, manuscript drafting and writing, methodology, formal analyses, data collection, and management and is one of the principal investigators of the project. Sanna Herkama contributed substantially to conceptualization, manuscript drafting and writing, and methodology. Minna Torppa contributed to writing, editing, and methodology; Tuija Aro contributed to writing and editing; Pilvi Hämeenaho contributed to writing and editing, qualitative data management, and analyses and is one of the principal investigators of the project.

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Data Availability Materials and analysis code for this study are currently available by emailing the corresponding author. The anonymized data is available at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive: https://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3611.

Declarations

Ethical Approval We followed the recommendations of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019).

Consent to Participate and for Publication Informed consent was obtained from the participants at the beginning of the survey. Aims of the project and the use of data in scientific publications were clearly stated, and a link to the Privacy Notice on processing of personal data was provided. It was emphasized that participation is voluntary, and the participant can decline to respond and withdraw from the study at any time.

Competing Interests The first two authors Miia Sainio and Sanna Herkama are certified KiVa trainers. The other authors in this manuscript do not have financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work.

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