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How peer support is conceptualised and implemented to reduce bullying in 10 European countries

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ABSTRACT

School bullying is recognised as a global concern with severe impacts on students' physical and mental health, as well as educational outcomes. While peer support has been recognised as valuable in bullying prevention, knowledge of how it is understood and effectively implemented remains limited. This study investigates how peer support is conceptualised by official educational authorities responsible for secondary school students in 10 European countries; Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Switzerland, and the UK. The purpose is to explore the concept of peer support, including the requirements of effective peer support and its outcomes in bullying prevention. A total of 63 documents were retrieved and analysed using Applied Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal that peer support is an umbrella term encompassing various activities, including peer mediation, mentoring, and tutoring. Effective peer support is characterised by the development of trust and forming relationships in diverse communities, and training students in communication skills and conflict resolution. The study concludes that while peer support initiatives are widely implemented, their effectiveness varies depending on programme design, implementation, and contextual factors. Their success largely depends on school communities and leadership. The findings underscore the need for a holistic approach that integrates peer support into the broader educational framework to create inclusive and safe school environments.


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Introduction

School bullying can have an adverse effect on physical and mental health as well as poor educational outcomes. As such, bullying is recognised as a major public health concern (Armitage, 2021). A study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2019) found that globally almost one in three school students experience bullying. Definitions have been debated (see for example, Menin et al., 2021; O'Brien, 2009; Tay, 2023) but recently UNESCO and the World Anti Bullying Forum (WABF) chaired by Professor James O'Higgins Norman et al. (2024, 4) proposed an inclusive definition of school bullying:

School bullying is in-person and online behaviour between students within a social network that causes physical, emotional or social harm to targeted students. It is characterized by an imbalance of power that is enabled or inhibited by the social and institutional norms and context of schools and the education system. School bullying implies an absence of effective responses and care towards the target by peers and adults.

This definition not only recognises the harm caused by bullying but highlights the impact it has on the social relationships of the target and wider peer group. Indeed, within this definition, the school environment is foregrounded as important with regard to how bullying is enabled or disabled. The school environment encompasses both the physical environment, including safety and security, and the psychological environment, including the school climate, classroom management and discipline and the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves (UNESCO, 2019). Literature suggests that reports of bullying and victimisation are lower when the school climate is positive (Hamada et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Peer support schemes are recognised as valuable in bullying prevention in both primary and secondary schools (Biswas et al., 2020; Cowie & Hutson, 2005) and can have a positive effect on school climate. Konishi et al. (2017) study conducted in Canada found that in schools where students reported high levels of peer support, as well as discipline and safety, reports of bullying or being bullied tended to be lower. Similarly, Borowiec et al. (2021) in their study carried out in Poland exploring bullying in physical education, alongside peer support, gender, weight status, and age, found that low peer support increased the probability of being a target or perpetrator of bullying in physical education. Indeed, students with more support from peers are less likely to be targeted and to have an overall positive experience in school (Lester & Mander, 2015). Despite these successes, knowledge on how peer support is understood and the features of effective peer support in schools is lacking.

For the purposes of this study, we are interested in how peer support is conceptualised by official educational authorities responsible for secondary school students in 10 European countries; Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Switzerland and the UK. As a result, we explore a concept of peer support, including the requirements of effective peer support and the outcomes of this for bullying prevention across our countries.

Literature review: peer support

Peer support systems, initially rooted in counselling, refer to adaptable frameworks that involve training children and young people to provide emotional and social assistance to peers in distress (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Ma et al., 2022; van der Meulen et al., 2021). Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019, 111) define peer support as an umbrella term that refers to:

... one way in which educational institutions are supporting and encouraging students to support each other, through a formalised framework.

The peer support approach was initially implemented in Canada and Australia starting in 1980 (Cowie & Smith, 2012) and has gradually gained acceptance in numerous countries including Finland, Japan, New Zealand, Spain, and the USA. Peer support programmes encompass a wide range of strategies and activities, including befriending, mentoring, peer counselling or tutoring, peer mediation, and peer-led initiatives (Brady et al., 2014; Cowie et al., 2002). Peer support in the school context is increasingly being developed in schools and colleges to supplement the work of pastoral care staff (Cowie et al., 2002) and are generally academic or social in terms of purpose Cowie and Wallace (2000); Leung et al. (2013). Academic peer mentoring relates to learning and usually involves older students or peers providing guidance, support, and friendship to younger or vulnerable students (Elledge et al., 2010). Indeed Hoferichter et al. (2022) found that peer support at the class level can improve a student's coping skills related to stress and burnout as well as academic success. Socially, peer mediation programmes can empower students to resolve conflicts among their peers, with the guidance of trained peer mediators (Philipson, 2012). These initiatives not only address specific incidents but also promote conflict resolution skills among students.

Many schools have adopted peer-led initiatives where students take an active role as leaders in creating a more inclusive and respectful school culture (Hajisoteriou & Sorkos, 2022). These initiatives often include awareness campaigns, peer-led workshops, and student-led anti-bullying clubs.

The successful implementation of peer support systems and programmes is underpinned by effective training. This typically encompasses the instruction of fundamental skills including active listening, empathy, problem-solving, and being supportive (Channon et al., 2013; Lekka et al., 2015; McElearney et al., 2008). Peer support systems, irrespective of their variations, possess distinct characteristics. Firstly, they involve a direct response to requests for assistance. Secondly, they equip peer helpers with skills and strategies to help those involved in a situation reach a resolution. Thirdly, while peer helpers take direct action, adults maintain a supportive and supervisory role. Fourthly, these interventions are non-punitive and establish clear channels of communication among those involved in the situation. These interventions operate under the assumption that students themselves have the capacity to play a constructive role in assisting peers in distress. They typically occur outside the classroom and depend on the school's commitment and resources to facilitate the peer support system (Nickerson et al., 2006; Sharp & Cowie, 1998). Cowie and Hutson (2005, 40) outline the features of effective peer support by drawing on the work of Cowie and Wallace (2000):

Young people are trained to work together outside friendship groups. This type of interaction helps to reduce prejudice and fosters trust across gender and ethnic groups.

Young people are given opportunities through training to learn good communication skills, to share information and to reflect on their own emotions in relationships with others.

Young people are trained to deal with conflict and to help peers to relate to one another in a more constructive, non-violent way.

These features resonate with the support required by those in bullying situation(s) whether as perpetrators, bystanders, or targets. Cowie (2014) suggests that when a peer support structure is present in a school, it provides an opportunity for bystanders to play a positive role in reporting unwanted behaviour towards their peers.

Peer support and bullying

Peer support has garnered significant attention in the realm of school bullying prevention and well-being research due to its association with targets, bystanders and perpetrators of bullying, as well as its effectiveness in alleviating depression symptoms (Du et al., 2018) or trauma (Turunen & Punamäki, 2016). Thus, peer support has particular relevance for bully targets, who often report experiencing various negative consequences such as feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and symptoms of depression (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

Research on peer support initiatives designed to reduce bullying prevalence show that bullying incidents can be reduced by fostering positive relationships and providing targets of bullying with a trusted source of support (Jenkins et al., 2017). Salmivalli (2014) argues that bullying is not just about individual characteristics but about the social dynamics within a group or classroom. The peer group provides the 'social architecture' that either fuels or inhibits bullying. She articulates the significant dependence of successful bullying prevention and intervention initiatives on the effective engagement of peer bystanders. She describes various 'participant roles' adopted by bystanders, specifically reinforcers who encourage the bully, assistants who actively support the bully, outsiders who remain uninvolved, and defenders who advocate for the target. Salmivalli (2014) contends that the social rewards and elevated status afforded to perpetrators by peer bystanders are instrumental in perpetuating bullying. Consequently, she argues that a fundamental shift in bystander behavior and an increased awareness among bystanders regarding their influence on students who are targets of bullying are essential for minimizing the adverse outcomes associated with such behavior. Consequently, the KiVA anti-bullying programme was developed in Finland for students aged 7 to 15 years (Salmivalli, 2010). It is a whole-school approach underpinned by the bystander's ability to increase or decrease a bullying episode and peer support is an underlying factor in the programme's success. Indeed, Hutchings and Clarkson (2015) note the impact of the KiVA programme in UK schools and report considerable reductions in both bullying and victimisation. In addition, teachers noted higher levels of student engagement with lessons and their acceptance of each other.

The prevalence of peer support initiatives in the fight against bullying reflects a growing recognition of the importance of peer relationships in students' lives (Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019). These initiatives have demonstrated the potential to reduce bullying incidents. Research asserts that peer support enhances students' social participation, interaction, and friendship development (Ho et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2009), while improving social and mental health affected by bullying incidents (Yang et al., 2023). Recent studies on moral sensitivity (the ability to recognize moral issues and feel the impact of one's actions on others) suggest that it is a strong counter force to bullying. It directly and indirectly influences prosocial behaviour by reducing moral disengagement (Coşkun et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2023). Peer support interventions therefore reinforce school belonging and inclusion, thus contributing to bullying prevention. Moreover, student sense of empowerment is boosted as participation in peer support initiatives can enhance the resilience and self-esteem of both targets and bullies, reducing the likelihood of continued bullying behaviours (Yang et al., 2023). Lastly, peer support systems foster a positive school environment. Schools that implement peer support systems often report improvements in their overall school climate (Cowie & Smith, 2012), characterised by increased empathy, cooperation, and a stronger sense of community, as '*a culture of support permeates the school culture*' (Brady et al., 2014, p. 250).

As peer support has proven beneficial in schools in both academic and social contexts, we were interested to know if and how government, district, or regional level organisations responsible for the education of secondary school students conceptualise and implement peer support in an attempt to reduce bullying. Our research question thus asks: '*How is peer support conceptualised and implemented to reduce bullying in 10 European Countries?*'

Method

Design

Document analysis (Gross, 2018) was used to review how school peer support is conceptualised and implemented to reduce bullying. We chose this approach because it is a systematic process to analyse documents as 'social facts' (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997) and we had experience using it for a previous study exploring immigrant student voices in the school environment (Välimäki et al., 2024). Policy document analysis is useful for understanding the content of documents as well as how the information is presented across geographies (Dalglish et al., 2021). Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) (Mackieson et al., 2019) was used to further interrogate the retrieved data.

Settings

The study was undertaken as part of the European-level collaboration COST Action project 'Transnational Collaboration on Bullying, Migration and Integration at School Level'. Data collection was conducted across 10 European countries (Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Switzerland and the UK). These countries represent different European geographical areas with diverse economic, size, cultural contexts and educational systems. For example, the population ranges from 1.3 million

Table 1. Breakdown of reviewed documents and document type.

Country	Number of documents	Document types	Types of peer support
Albania	4	1 policy document 2 guidelines 1 law	Student government Student parliament
Austria	3	1 guidance 1 website 1 peer learning database	Peer mediation Buddy systems Break peers Read peers Bus Peers Eco peers Peer coaches
Cyprus	3	2 guidelines 1 policy	Student mediation Mentors School mediation
Finland	7	4 Guidelines 1 policy 1 recommendation 1 website	Student council Peer student activities Volunteer work Sustainable development activities Peer mediation Support student instructors Peer coaching Peer support Tutor activity
Germany	20	6 Guidelines 5 Reports 1 Overview 1 Discussion 1 Strategy 1 Conference 1 Brochure 1 Handout 1 Action Guide 1 Quality Framework 1 Information	Peer-to-peer learning Peer-to-peer approach Peer mediation Peer-interactions Peer-tutoring-methods Peer-assisted-learning (PAL) Peer-to-peer Readings Peer feedback Peer education Peer-educators Peer teaching Peer-training Peer-to-peer concept Peer education
Ireland	7	4 policy documents 2 guidelines 1 law	Respecting children's voice. Collaborative groups Student councils
Kosovo	3	Regulation (legally binding) Guideline Catalogue	Peer mediation Mediator student Mediation teams/clubs Support groups
North Macedonia	3	Guideline Action plan Children's Rights organization document	Recommendations for schools to establish peer support groups, school clubs (e.g. sports clubs), and other forms of preventive school-based programmes. Specific guidelines or programmatic efforts are not listed but are left up to schools.
Switzerland	4	3 reports 1 guideline	Peer mediation Peacemaker
UK	9	1 research review 2 research reports 1 evidence analysis 1 task force 3 guidelines 1 programme	One-to-one support. Group-based support. Training-based projects. Online projects. Community based projects Buddy schemes Peer mentoring/tutoring/coaching Befriending schemes

people (Cyprus) to 84 million people (Germany) with a diverse range of languages spoken in each country. Compulsory education ranges from age 4 (in Switzerland) to age 19 (in North Macedonia).

Eligibility criteria

Within each of our countries, we reviewed documents published by official educational authorities responsible for secondary school students, to ascertain how peer support is conceptualised and/or supported at national, regional or local levels to help reduce bullying. The number of documents from each country was not limited and were retrieved from the authorities' websites (Please see [Table 1](#) for a breakdown of the documents reviewed as well as the types of documents).

Included documents were those that targeted secondary schools where students are aged 11 years and over. This included overlapping documents (for example, those that span both primary and secondary school age). Included documents were publicly available and published by national, regional, or local authorities responsible for secondary school education. All document types were included, for example, Acts/Laws, policy documents, guidelines, or any ministerial-level curriculums guiding secondary school students' learning or well-being. Excluded documents were those designed specifically for primary schools, vocational schools, colleges, and universities.

Data extraction tool

To ensure similar data extraction from each reviewer, we used a predefined data extraction tool comprising 11 items: six on document characteristics and five on peer support. First, reviewers filled in the background characteristics of the document including 1) a web link to the document, 2) a specification of the document type, 3) the age range of students that the document addresses, 4) the name of the document, 5) aim of the document, and 6) who the document is intended for, if stated. For example, this might include parents/carers, students, or others. Second, using the features outlined by Cowie and Wallace (2000) above, reviewers extracted data that referred to, 7) how peer support is defined/conceptualised (if applicable), 8) the types of peer support identified, 9) the development of trust and forming relationships with a variety of other young people across ethnicities and genders, 10) the development of good communication skills, sharing information with each other and reflections on how to manage relationships with others and 11) conflict management and helping peers relate to each other constructively without violence. We used these criteria as they give a well-rounded view of peer support and it was likely that each country would have evidence related to one or more of these criteria, given the commitment from each to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This was particularly pertinent to Article 15; freedom of association and peaceful assembly and Article 17; access to information.

When the reviewers identified references to any of these criteria, they copied and pasted the content and, if needed, translated the text into English. The data extraction tool was in Excel format (Microsoft Office, WA, USA).

Data analysis

Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) as described by Mackieson et al. (2019) was used to analyse the retrieved data. This involved five stages. First, all authors were involved in the planning and preparation stage through identifying documents in each of our countries. Second, the authors visited the appropriate websites for their country and placed the data on the Excel spreadsheet in accordance with items of the data extraction tool. The filled sheets were downloaded to the working group members' private Microsoft Teams page. They were subsequently appraised and synthesised by authors NOB and AD using ATA.

The first level of analysis involved NOB and AD reading through the entire dataset. These authors followed an a-priori coding format using the criteria of peer support as identified by Cowie and Wallace (2000) and as agreed by all authors. The second level involved re-reviewing and refining the codes to ensure nothing was missed and to request translations or further information from other team members. The third and final stage produced the report of the data under four main themes comprising five sub-themes as presented below.

Findings

A concept of peer support

A total of 63 documents (see Table 1: Breakdown of reviewed documents and document type) were reviewed across our 10 countries with 30 documents specifically referring to peer support as it relates to education and/or mediation (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Peer support is an umbrella term in these documents encompassing an array of initiatives for overall learning and mediation.

Peer support for learning or mentoring is seen in documents from Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland and the UK and includes terms related to *peer tutoring*, *peer coaching*, *peer listening*, and *peer mentoring*. In Austria, peer support for learning is seen in the term '*peer learning*' which uses a 'cooperative learning' approach through exchanges with peers. Peers are regarded as credible role models in the social learning process and support their fellow students with regard to values, identity, life orientation, future prospects, and overcoming problems (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2006). German documents suggest the important need for citizenship education and realising democratic education where peer education and support is a vital component (Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, 2018). In this safe space of peer support in the school, students can help each other to learn. In Albania, documents encourage students to help each other in a planned and structured way (2020).

With regard to peer support for mediation, the terms *peer mediation*, *peer counselling*, *befriending* and *buddying* are used in documents from Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Switzerland and the UK. For the most part, these initiatives refer to a process of peaceful resolution in disputes or conflicts between students and students or between students and teachers. Indeed, these roles are also important as preventative roles with regard to bullying and promoting the school as a safe space. In Switzerland for example, peer supporters are identified as 'conflict mediators' or 'peacemakers' (Zurich City Office for Violence Prevention, 2022). They aim

Table 2. A concept of peer support across 10 countries.

Category of Peer Support	Countries	Terms & Key Characteristics	Purpose & Observed Benefits
Peer Support for Mentoring/Learning	Albania, Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, UK	Peer tutoring, peer coaching, peer listening, peer mentoring, peer learning, cooperative learning	Overall learning support, social learning, values integration, identity formation, life orientation, future prospects, problem-solving, citizenship education, democratic education, structured help
Peer Support for Mediation	Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Switzerland, UK	Peer mediation, peer counselling, befriending, buddying, conflict mediators, peacemakers	Peaceful resolution of disputes/ conflicts (student-student, student-teacher), preventative role for bullying, promoting safe school spaces, strengthening conflict resolution skills, reducing frequency/severity of disputes

to facilitate improved solutions to minor incidents and interpersonal conflicts by enhancing skills such as accepting the views of others, collaborative problem solving and effective communication.

Mediation, as a process of consensual conflict resolution, aims to reduce the frequency and severity of disputes and strengthens students' conflict resolution skills both inside and outside school. Cyprus has developed 'Principles of Structured Conflict Resolution' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016) where conflicting parties find solutions together. In Austria (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2006) peer mediation is based on the experience that conflict resolution by classmates is often better accepted by the disputing parties than by adult intervention. Kosovo acknowledges the importance of conflict resolution and recognises the role that students and teachers have as mediators in conflict resolution. In North Macedonia the document 'Leaders for Education Activism and Development. Protocol for preventing and dealing with violence' outlines a course of action in handling and responding to violence in schools. It offers steps to reintegrate targets of bullying and those involved in bullying back into the school environment. The government-issued National Strategy (2020–2025) and Action Plan (2020–2022) for violence prevention and protection of children (2019) underscore the North Macedonian law on secondary education by partnering with international child protection organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children to enact school guidelines for child protection and facilitate school programmes for prevention of peer violence. This action plan emphasizes strengthening prosocial and communicative skills in high school students and encouraging positive peer relationships through school-wide programmatic efforts. Indeed, Georgievska and Petrovska (2024) consider peer support as a viable way to mitigate bullying including, 'preventive programs for peer violence; peer mediation; violence prevention programs in adolescent relationships' (p.51). Table 2 below clusters the two main types of peer support discussed above, the relevant countries for each, the terminology used and the general purpose.

For some of our countries, peer support is encouraged as a tool for mediation and for mentoring while for others it is one or the other. This could be related to the diverse economic potential, governance structures, educational ideologies and/ or the cultural contexts of each of our countries. Some countries have structured approaches (Albania & Cyprus), whilst others are organic, fostering more local and

contextual flexibility and agency. Understanding these diversities encourages insights about why understanding and implementation of peer support differs across contexts. With this caveat we considered how these concepts of peer support are implemented across our countries.

Development of trust and forming relationships with a variety of other young people across ethnicities and genders

Thirteen documents described the development of trust and forming relationships with a variety of other students across ethnicities and genders as important for effective peer support programmes.

In the documents from Cyprus, Ireland, Switzerland and the UK, peer support programmes are one of the ways students experiencing high levels of psychological distress can be supported at school and trust is an important component. One UK document (Coleman et al., 2017) showed that students generally felt more confident to talk after trust was established and felt more confident to share issues that were causing them concern. The importance of the sustainability and longevity of this support was highly important in rendering this trust. This was the case in group settings as well as one-to-one situations. Consequently, safe and trusting relationships are seen as essential in the promotion of positive mental health and resilience and are key to a successful peer support programme (HM Government, 2021). Although a similar view is taken in Finland, the focus is largely on the learning environment and school community to develop trust and relationships (Pulkkinen, 2015). Social well-being is strongly linked to the sense of belonging to a community and the feeling of being accepted by others in that community. Finland recommends schools to consciously support community building and one effect of this is a reduction in bullying and the experience of loneliness. Community is built on values and the Finnish documents proffer the importance of diversity as an underpinning value (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). They suggest that through interaction, supporting positive group dynamics and cooperation with diverse others, a student can grow in recognition of their unique special quality. Swiss documents highlight the importance of representation regarding age, gender, and ethnicity across peer support programmes (Stadt Zuerich Fachstelle für Gewaltprävention, 2022).

Irish documents recognise the importance of friendships at school; that friendships contribute to improved health and well-being and a sense of belonging and purpose; friendships are essential for the psychological, emotional and social development of students, allowing them to learn how to relate to others and about reciprocity, social standing and power (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2021; Smyth, 2015). These documents also recognise that developing and maintaining friendships can support positive mental health and educational outcomes for all students.

...positive relationships between teachers and students, and students and their peers, along with a sense of connectedness, are the key protective factors for students' sense of wellbeing while in school (NCCA, 2021, p. 22).

Indeed, the Finnish National Board of Education (2016) recognises the importance of forming friendships as well as having inclusive ways of working that must be consciously supported at the school level.

Training for the development of good communication skills, sharing information with each other and reflections on how to manage relationships with others

Across the ten countries, 18 documents were found on this topic under three themes:

- Communication skills
- School culture and sense of community
- Information sharing

Communication skills

Across the documents, effective peer support programmes show that success is not only dependent on the training but on the interpersonal skills of the peer supporters themselves. In Switzerland for example 'Conflict Mediators' are elected posts and those in these roles need to be perceived as competent by their fellow students. They need to demonstrate qualities including listening skills, discretion, and reliability. Schools can determine their own criteria for election (Averdijk et al., 2015).

Similarly, UK documents show that communication and interpersonal skills including active listening are important qualities for peer supporters, and those in these roles need to be able to demonstrate problem-solving skills (Department for Education, 2020). In Cyprus (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016) and Switzerland (Averdijk et al., 2015), the reviewed documents highlight the importance of body language and non-verbal cues in peer support communication skills. Furthermore, Kosovo documents (Republic of Kosovo, 2023) emphasise the need to teach students how to express anger without resorting to aggressive behaviour.

School culture and sense of community

Training for the development of good communication skills, sharing information and reflections on how to manage relationships can be underpinned by a positive school culture and sense of community. In Finland, documents focussed on this philosophy arguing that a positive student welfare system plays a significant role in reducing negative behaviours towards each other, including bullying (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Indeed, the goal of peer support in Finland is to develop a culture whereby peer support is encouraged, and negative/harmful behaviours are not accepted in school. In developing such an ethos, schools need to acknowledge the adult-free zones that young people occupy, including social media spaces that contribute to shaping the world views that they have. A positive school culture can be promoted through teaching but also extracurricular activities. In Finland (Laitinen et al., 2020) and Kosovo (Republic of Kosovo, 2023), it is argued that peer mediation can positively change the atmosphere of a school to one of cooperation and optimism as all members of the community feel a sense of ownership over the school. Albania supports the work of the community through the creation of a student parliament. Article 71 of the Order of the Minister of Education no. 31 (2020) document states that the student has a duty to help their fellow students towards

school success and the smooth running of the school. This mutual positive social atmosphere promotes students' commitment to school activities and promotes study motivation and professional growth. It is particularly important in the early days of secondary school, therefore, to support friendship groups that can promote a sense of security.

Sharing information

Secondary school students need opportunities to engage in meaningful civic discourse that contributes to change in their school. This requires drawing on examples of good practice locally, nationally, and internationally. It also involves learning from the wider literature and effective models including Lundy's (2007) four components of student's voice – space, voice, audience and influence – as demonstrated in the Irish-reviewed documents (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).

Role modelling and lived experience are important here. Swiss documents suggest that the whole school community should develop common and prosocial values and live them in everyday school life. This value system should make it clear that no form of violence is accepted and that targets of bullying are supported. Preventive measures in schools should positively change attitudes towards violence and the ability to empathise (Haab Zehrê et al., 2013).

Conflict management and helping peers relate to each other constructively without violence

Sixteen documents related to conflict management with a focus on effectively teaching students how to resolve conflicts in a prosocial way as well as some examples of good practice.

- Conflict management
- Examples of good practice

Conflict management

Some of the reviewed documents suggest that students need to be taught the necessary skills to deal with conflict and therefore its resolution. In Ireland, one document suggests that as well as conflict management and resolution, students need to learn to develop strategies to make informed choices about their interpersonal behaviours and learn how to negotiate their rights in relation to the rights of others (NCCA, 2021). In the UK it has been suggested that the training of peer supporters and mediators leads to resolution skills. For example, where robust impact assessments have been carried out, there has been some evidence of success in programmes addressing conflict resolution and conduct disorder/anger management (Department of Health, 2012). Furthermore, in Cyprus conflict management in secondary schools takes place through a structured process with an emphasis on compromise (Andreou et al., 2016).

Examples of good practice

In Finland and Switzerland, the prominence is on teaching students and leading by example to resolve conflicts in an ethical and compassionate way. In Finland, *Verso* is a peer mediation programme with a restorative approach that offers an alternative way to

resolve conflicts between students and between teachers or other staff and students in everyday school life. Mediation is a clear operating model, with which school staff members and/or students trained as mediators help the parties themselves find a solution to conflict and bullying situations (Olkkonen, 2020).

In Switzerland, the emphasis of the programme '... navigating through conflicts' (Zurich City Office for Violence Prevention, 2022) is on promoting a sense of understanding the other's point of view to resolve the conflict together. The aim is to find a solution that both parties are satisfied with. Through conversation, the conflict mediators constructively support all parties to find a solution. The programme aims to improve life together at school. In the long term, peer mediation should become part of the school's internal conflict management culture. For this to happen, it must be integrated into everyday school life in a sustainable way. 'Peacemakers' actively involve themselves in resolving the dispute before the incident is reported, therefore acting in a de-escalating manner. The role of the bystander is important here as they can actively promote or inhibit unacceptable behaviour at school. The success of the prevention initiatives depends on the pro-social behaviour of their peers.

In a German document, an example is offered of a peer project to promote reading in which students are trained as reading experts in workshops to motivate their peers or younger classmates to read, to support them and to ensure a reading-friendly climate in their school (Schneider et al., 2012). Older students are trained as learning coaches and work with younger children in learning times under the guidance of a teacher.

In Austria, a peer-learning guide (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2006) notes how students know of the many problems faced by their peers and can be credible role models. They therefore play a major role in the social learning process. Peers thus have the opportunity to find out that their actions are effective and where the limits of their actions lie. They assume responsibility and in doing so, draw conclusions about their own development and their own potential.

These findings underscore the critical importance for all nations to develop actionable strategies for schools, policymakers, and pastoral care staff. Each thematic area describes the profound significance of positive relationships and a robust school culture in fostering effective peer support. A central and consistently observed prerequisite was the students' fundamental need for belonging within both the broader school community and their immediate peer groups. This essential sense of belonging and community integration necessitates the dedicated allocation of time within the curriculum and the daily school schedule for the cultivation of friendships, the provision of platforms for student voice, and the establishment of conducive communication spaces. A singular focus on the academic dimension of schooling, without addressing these social and emotional needs, directly contradicts the actions required to cultivate meaningful peer support.

The implications necessitate a reimagining of traditional school timetables, thereby reflecting an institutional valuation of peer support processes. Challenges to this reimagining primarily stem from the occasional absence of national policy frameworks for peer support, leading to a reliance on individual schools to independently embed such practices. Consequently, there is a clear demand for enhanced professional development and learning opportunities, coupled with improved terminological literacy surrounding the concept of peer support.

Discussion

Our data shows that in most countries, the guidance to secondary schools from government, district, or regional level educational organisations responsible for the education of secondary school students regards peer support as important. The emergence of peer support interventions across these countries is not random, but indicative of a deeper understanding of the nature of bullying (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2024), the power and role of the peer group (Salmivalli, 2014), the rights of the child (UNESCO, 1995) and educational and policy priorities (Biesta, 2024). Despite the evidence of the growth of peer support policies and interventions, the responsibility of facilitating peer support tends to fall on the school community and school leadership. Furthermore, not all countries realise or implement all the features of peer support as outlined by Cowie and Wallace (2000). Many contextual, financial and cultural factors could explain this. It is important to point out that peer support is acknowledged as 'one way' (Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019) that schools can work to reduce bullying and we did not explore other interventions.

Promoting a positive school experience

Peer support can enrich the holistic development of students and ensure a sound developmental base not only for academic achievement but also for positive well-being and overall positive school experience. The new definition of bullying (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2024, p. 2) highlights the importance of social networks for students' physical, emotional and social well-being and peer support can help enrich these relationships (Gaffney et al., 2021). Giroux (1994) describes students as 'border youth', representing less a distinct class, membership, or social group but rather:

The emergence of a set of conditions, translations, border crossings, attitudes, and dystopian sensibilities among youth that cuts across race and class and that represents a fairly new phenomenon. (p. 361)

He argues that sensitivity to human differences and talking are essential for the prevention of antisocial behaviours. Thus, through peer support in the guise of training, communication and disruption to normative values that enable bullying, students can be empowered to shift imbalances of power within school social networks (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). It offers them the agency to understand each other and the problems and concerns they face from their particular points of view rather than from an adult standpoint (Cowie, 2011).

Certainly, peer support in schools is more effective when it is integrated into a whole school-supportive ethos or policy (Cowie & Smith, 2012). The variations of implementation across our countries highlighted the importance of not just what a policy does, but how deeply and systemically, and for what broader purposes peer support is integrated into the diverse educational landscapes. O'Higgins Norman et al. (2024) in re-defining school bullying, argue that single-school interventions are not showing significant declines in bullying perpetration or victimisation and that bullying continues to be an issue for school pastoral care. 'Whole school' approaches place the responsibility for tackling bullying on the individual school and ignore the impact of the nestedness of their school within wider society (Cornu et al., 2023). Consequently, peer support is an

integrated element among practices and attitudes related to the improvement of relationships and the well-being of the entire educational community (van der Meulen et al., 2021). Peer support initiatives therefore, can move beyond the instrumental (e.g. just to resolve conflicts) to aligning with national and local educational ideologies. This ideological underpinning can act as a critical differentiator to how deeply and sustainably peer support is embedded in the school curriculum and culture.

Rebalancing power

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that young people have the right to participate in decision-making and issues that affect them if they so choose (Bessell, 2017). Consequently, adults need to provide participation opportunities and relinquish some of the power associated with these opportunities to enable students to resolve conflict together and support each other. A good example of this can be seen in the Swiss documents in the form of 'peacemakers'.

However, notwithstanding this there are underlying issues related to power and how (and which) student voices and perspectives are meaningfully heard in schools (Finneran et al., 2023; Lundy, 2007; Pearce & Wood, 2019) and included in the design and delivery of peer support. The underlying principles of peer support initiatives empower students to speak up and contribute to positive changes, but they are at the mercy of adults' willingness to enable and support this (Biddle & Mitra, 2015). All too often student voice initiatives are stalled by adult-centric ideas and philosophies including the selection of students for participation and the silencing of others in the process (Jones & Hall, 2022). This in turn contradicts the participatory standards of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Participatory and co-production approaches which focus on intersectionality, fairness and equity could transform the student voice agenda ensuring representation from all. However, across the documents we reviewed we did not find any evidence of student involvement in developing these documents. Although many referred to and accounted for diversity, more work is needed to streamline this. Schools are places of diversity where students should be encouraged to support and celebrate differences (Doyle & O'Brien, 2025). Peer support initiatives designed as 'a one size fits all' approach will not be successful for most schools and need to account for the diverse realities and needs of all students. One way to address this is through Lundy's (2007) model of participation which could be integrated into government level documents, as it is in the Irish documents, to assess genuine participation that respects the rights of all students to be involved in initiatives, including peer support, if they so wish. This model moves beyond counting the numbers involved to assessing meaningful engagement including how students are contributing to shaping the peer support process within their schools.

(Re)Conceptualising peer support

Within the reviewed documents a multiplicity of terms to conceptualise peer support highlights the complexity of developing an overarching understanding of what it means. It covers a range of activities designed and enacted in a multiplicity of ways to build and

develop a school culture that promotes a safe learning environment and/or encourages engagement in the process of conflict mediation.

Documents from most countries saw peer support as an approach that could enrich the holistic development of the student and ensure a sound developmental base for academic achievement. This requires all educators to respect and value the voices of students and foster their belonging and connectedness to the school community (Charteris & Smardon, 2019) and beyond it. Peer support initiatives have gained traction as a prominent approach to addressing school bullying (Cowie, 2014; Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023) and this is evident in our reviewed documents in terms of the training received by peer supporters, particularly in conflict mediation. Peer support initiatives are associated with a reduction in bullying incidents, as they create an environment where students feel comfortable to not only report victimisation but also to report what they witness and seek help from their peers (Cowie, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2022; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019). Indeed, researchers are also shifting their focus beyond the dynamics of the bully-target relationship and examining the social context that fosters bullying behaviour, as well as the involvement of bystanders in either enabling or confronting such behaviour (Jenkins et al., 2017; O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022).

The reviewed documents highlight the correlativity between the social and affective side of school life and the progression of the academic. The organisations in most countries recognise the importance of friendship to children and young people; that friendships contribute to improved health and well-being and a sense of belonging and purpose; friendships are essential for the psychological, emotional, and social development of children and young people, allowing them to learn how to relate to others including reciprocity, social standing, and power. They also recognise that an ability to develop and maintain friendships can support positive mental health and educational outcomes for children and young people (Alotaibi et al., 2023). Literature shows that peer support can promote positive student-student relationships (van der Meulen et al., 2021). Friendships matter and Salmivalli (2014) contends that the less victimized students are supported and defended, the more likely bullying is maintained in a classroom or a peer group. Indeed, Dodd et al. (2022) argue that it should be a core part of the school curriculum at all schools because building positive peer relationships is essential for the development of young people's well-being. For the most part peer support is integral to the school curriculum across our 10 countries.

The educational encounter with peer support promotes a school culture and environment of safety and well-being where students can achieve academic success, flourish and come into presence as the person they are (Biesta, 2020). Research published by the OECD (2017) shows a positive correlation between a sense of belonging at school, satisfaction with life, and academic performance. Coleman et al. (2017) suggest that reviews of peer support have found mixed evidence of success, although overall they can result in a range of positive outcomes for young people. Long et al. (2021) and Coyle et al. (2022) suggest that over time, peer support initiatives lead to enhancements in the social climate of the school. Additionally, users tend to find them beneficial. The implementation of peer support initiatives has the potential to elevate a school's image as a caring and morally upright institution, thereby shaping the broader school environment and ethos (Brady et al., 2014; Cowie & Smith, 2012). However, we are reminded by James (2011), 25) that:

The combination of the variety of methods of peer support and the many reasons it may be used, means that there is no single way of measuring the effectiveness of peer support.

However, what should be noted is that the effectiveness of peer support initiatives can vary based on programme design, implementation, and other contextual factors including commitment from school leadership, and the broader socio-cultural context.

While the potential of peer support and indeed engaging students in these initiatives for mediation, mentoring and both is realised in the documents we reviewed, it is also important to acknowledge the rhetoric. Peer support cannot be a one-off, tick box exercise. It needs to be embedded in a school's culture with a move towards youth-led initiatives. For peer support to be successful, programmes underpinned by mediation or mentoring (or both) need to be financially resourced, culturally sensitive and inclusive of all students who choose to be involved. Proper training for teachers and students that support not only a development of the skills needed in relation to peer support but a new learning around the importance of how democracy and voice works within a school environment. Indeed peer support is interpreted in diverse ways across the reviewed documents which demonstrates flexibility in the approach and the capacity to adapt to a range of social and cultural contexts.

Implications and limitations

Although our approach enabled us to analyse a wider variety of documents from government, district, and regional level organisations responsible for the education of secondary school students, it is not without its limitations. Some jurisdictions have highly centralised education systems and policies are processed through a top-down system, whilst other countries have more decentralised systems and allow for greater local autonomy. The implications in more decentralised systems allow for more agency in the responses to peer support and provide a more varied and context-specific initiatives at regional and school level.

Document analysis did not allow us to explore the reality of peer support in schools, rather the documents provided guidance on how schools should and can implement peer support. Future research should consider utilising other approaches to gather empirical data from students and school staff so the rhetoric and reality of peer support across our 10 countries can be further understood. Research could also further explore how the focus of educational policy is primarily on academic outcomes or offers more extensive educational purposes such as socialisation and subjectification.

Conclusion

Across the literature, scholars (Armitage, 2021) and organizations (UNESCO, 2019) have brought attention to how prevalent bullying is and emphasized the deleterious effects of bullying on youth across the globe as well as the immediate need for systematic support. To respond to this need, we illustrated possible ways school communities can mitigate bullying from the perspective of an ethic of care and community-based approaches through peer support. As O'Higgins Norman et al. (2024) note, bullying is an issue of power and systems, and as such, it is imperative to examine how government, district, or regional level supports shape the education of secondary students across diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts.

We explored how peer support is conceptualised across 10 European countries to examine what type of bullying prevention supports are enacted as a result and found that peer mentoring and peer support were recognized in various forms and capacities, which indicates that such supports need to be strengthened as efforts to mitigate bullying continue to be cultivated. Moreover, beyond the dialogic and responsive dimensions of peer support, we also found individual traits that school communities should be cultivating in students such as communication and information-sharing skills while a culturally responsive school community was a prerequisite to fostering a strong sense of student belonging, which was linked both to bullying prevention and enhancing school and community connectedness.

All reviewed documents underscore the necessity to leverage student spaces, voices, and influence (Lundy, 2007) or, in other words, student agency as a mitigating factor in bullying prevention and school belonging. In order for students to embody traits of peer mentorship, support, and stewardship, school programmes must recognise students' lived experiences as central facets of schooling and facilitate support through modelling examples of reflection and mediation practices (for example, see UK example of training of peer supporters and mediators) and experiential supports (for example, see Finish example of the peer mediation program Verso). However, it is important to note the difficulty in reducing bullying in schools. The power of the peer group, the popularity and social status of its members, the normative values and behaviours held and lived out by the group (Juvonen & Galvan, 2008), all contribute to the complexity of successful peer support interventions. One important insight from the study lies in the real significance of mobilizing the peer group to support those who become the targets of bullying and help them feel that they belong, are included and valued by their peers (Salmivalli, 2014).

However, what should be noted is that the effectiveness of peer support initiatives can vary based on programme design, implementation, and other contextual factors including a commitment from school leadership to be responsive of the broader socio-cultural context. Hence, there is no one way to implement peer support systems; rather, this constitutes a variety of student-centred approaches focusing on community relationships and trust-building across a network of school-wide supports. At the crux of this complex issue is power and to disrupt issues of school inequities, we must empower youth to be 'border crossers' (Giroux, 1994) to act as peacemakers and disrupt acts of violence and bullying both in and out of school spaces. Thus, students must be given the space to step into these identities and responsibilities as community stewards in solidarity with their peers and wider school support networks.

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