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***“I leave me outside when I come in school and pick myself back up on the way home”:* Young people’s perspectives on healthy schools**

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Abstract

A collaborative, multi method qualitative case study of three secondary schools was undertaken as part of a Healthy Schools initiative. Year 8 and year 10 pupils gave accounts of how school made them feel. Thematic analysis of these accounts revealed positive and negative links between environment and well-being in schools. In particular, spaces such as the playground and places within school provided sites for bullying and exclusion, and at the same time friendship and belonging. Properties of spaces, such as the physical fabric of buildings and degrees of surveillance also influenced well being. Pupils exercised control over their environments largely through the breaking of what were considered petty and dis-empowering rules. The research indicates the powerful role of place in the emotional well-being of children at schools and suggests that the development of schools as emotionally ‘restorative and healthy places’ require a much fuller understanding of the person-environment relationship.

Keywords: emotional well-being; schools; place

1. Introduction

The healthy schools concept begins with the notion that if pupils feel happy and safe in their school environment then they are more likely to achieve their potential because the atmosphere is more conducive to quite concentration, social and academic learning (Weare and Gray, 2003). There is an emphasis on developing emotional and social health, with the potential to improve working environment for pupils and staff by affecting the ethos of the school and creating a positive environment for all (Carlisle, 2004).

Psychosocial well-being in schools can refer to the support of a child’s psychological and social development through the provision of secure and stimulating learning environments that permit self-expression, self-actualisation, self-confidence and positive self-esteem. Emotional well-being is, in part, influenced by socio-environmental factors experienced at school (Blatchford, 1998; de Jong, 1996). Acknowledging the function of such places, and the significance they hold for young people are crucial for gaining an understanding of the development of well-being (see Asher and Paquette, 2003) yet this has been a relatively neglected area of research (Alperstein and Raman, 2003). Moreover, the perspectives of young people themselves need to be heard if well-being within school is to be tackled appropriately.

2. Methodology

A multi-method qualitative case study of three schools within a LEA Healthy Schools Initiative, was undertaken. Teenage pupils from years 8 (12 to 13 year olds) and 10 (14 to 15 year olds)

participated within a participatory research framework where researcher and researched worked together in consultation workshops to develop a mode of investigation that was relevant, inclusive, empowering and sufficiently fine grained to capture the complexity of social experience.. A combination of written work, interviews, emotional diaries and experiential 'walks' enabled pupils to give accounts of their school life. Each method gave access to different forms of data and allowed a wide range of pupils of different abilities and interests to have a stake in the research process.

Thematic analysis of the accounts highlighted the important role of the socio-psychological and physical environment in creating spaces for positive and negative emotional well-being.

3. Analysis

3.1. The playground

The playground was a primary site for both negative and positive well-being. Pupils appropriated these spaces as their own, mainly during lunch times and breaks. Due to lack of direct teacher interventions, opportunities for bullying were available. The openness of bullying in the playground caused tremendous stress for victims who not only felt threatened but also immensely humiliated. Moreover, the practices and 'climate of bullying' within the schools were well understood amongst pupils, and formal policies thought to be ineffective. Bullying fractured supportive relationships and led to social isolation:

Yeah, he's always getting bullied, all the time. He won't have any friends cause people who want to be his friend will think 'Oh I'm not being his friend cause everyone will pick on me as well as him'. It's awful. I used to stick up for him but there was like older people and if I stuck up for him they just hit me. (Oliver interview, year 8)

The feelings of loneliness could be quite profound and have a dramatic impact upon a pupil's experience of school.

School makes me feel really lonely, like an outsider.... Whenever I am at home. I dread the next day, coming into school because I don't know what to do with myself, or who to make friends with and how! (Female pupil, year 10, written)

Bullying led to feelings described variously from irritation and frustration to fear and terror. In serious cases, being bullied meant pupils feared for their personal safety, expected social humiliation and experienced considerable levels of anguish:

People call you [names] and you have no one to blame but yourself because of the way you are. It hurts, you get lower and lower by the time you go home you feel like crying (Female pupil, year 8, written work)

Official and unofficial zoning in the playground both triggered and prevented bullying. Playground zones were occupied by particular groups and to step into a zone for another social or year group was to be placed at risk. Furthermore, the playground was described as boring, with little to do, crowded, dangerous and a place to feel left out, socially excluded, while others all around seemed to be socially integrated, active and happy.

Social spaces created within schools were usually located outside of the classroom and playgrounds contained particular characteristics, such as having places to sit and somewhere that is quiet. Pupils actively sought out such spaces for the express purpose of meeting with their friends:

On the ... court because erm..like everyone goes there because ...all our friends go there so if we picked another meeting place half of them wouldn't turn up `cos they go to [there] ... and we'd be like half of us so it's better really just meeting up in one place every time .. then if you want go somewhere from there you can go. (Holly interview year 8)

Playground spaces were, however contested and reshaped by pupils as part of their overall school experience. Where little power was available for pupil's within the school building, there were opportunities for rebellion in the playground. Rebellion usually took the form of rule-break. Overall, the playground was a highly ambiguous and rather unpredictable emotional space within all three schools, one in which power plays between pupils, social inclusions and exclusions and rebellions were made possible.

3.2. Properties of space

Many of the accounts of school space and its impact on emotional well-being derived from the guided experiential walks. Pupils constantly talked about the general air of neglect in their schools and pointed out damp and disrepair in evidence and how this made them feel. Pupils at poorly resourced schools felt they were a reflection of their school: undervalued, worthless, dirty, uncared for. There were many instances where pupils showed us dark corridors, flaking paint and so on, expressing their distaste in their environments and their lack of power to effect real change to improve such places:

It's dead grotty and everything `cos it's the oldest block there. ... the tables are just wrecked. There's graffiti all over the tables ... there's no curtains up or blinds or anything. ... you have for put your coat on the back of your chair, there's no hangers. Like your coat always falls off and the floor's dead dirty. ... if you put it back on you feel really dirty. ...you feel dead cold even if it's a warm day. ... That room just makes you feel dirty and horrible... (Holly interview year 8)

The physical space inside the school was described as overcrowded. Some corridors were described as dark, dangerous and squashed where younger pupils could get victimised and hurt.

You walk in and you could pick your feet ... because they are all so squashed into one thing ... you can pick your feet up and get carried in the corridor ... Yeah elbowing, squashing you against the walls. (Robert interview year 8)

Pupils knew which corridors to avoid if possible because of different spaces occupied by different pupil groups. These were spaces where bullying was more likely to happen unobserved. However, in the best instances, new resources, new buildings and redecoration were appreciated by pupils and engendered positive feelings.. In these cases, well-being was described as enhanced by a well maintained physical environment and a well resourced school. Pupil's often had

favourite spaces in the school and these generally linked to availability of computers, library (clean, calm and order) and well maintained classrooms.

Pupils pointed out visual reminders of tightened surveillance and security, which led some to feel caged in and criminalised, as if they were in a prison. They felt that the security cameras were more for watching children's behaviour than for school security. This meant that personal privacy was difficult to attain, and signalled the fact that staff did not trust pupils, thereby undermining relationships of respect between pupils and staff.

My school is like a prison. Recently they have just got new cameras. The railings are ok and a few cameras but not more than 7 - what are we, dangerous criminals? To make it better get rid and trust us more. It may be for safety but no terrorists are going to come into a classroom wielding a shotgun. (Male pupil, year 8, written)

Surveillance of what were considered private, personal spaces, such as the toilets, was also evident. Surveillance at dinnertime also caused pupil concern. The importance of dinnertime was indicated again and again in the diary data. Dinnertime was not just important because it was free time, but because it was meal time. However, for many, surveillance practices spoilt their dinnertime and gave rise to feelings of frustration and aggression:

Teachers are also around when you are eating your dinner, they just keep hovering round whilst you are eating. Winding you up. You just feel like getting up out of your seat and going to the teacher and giving the teacher a left hook. (Female pupil, year 10, written work)

3.3. Direct and tacit school rules

School rules were described in terms of the stripping away individuality. For female pupils, rules around physical appearance were particularly difficult to accept, especially in year 10 when appearance mattered a great deal. Some thought that the school system defied their own sense of self and rather than fight against the combination of rules in places, they would rather resign themselves to the enactment of self within the school day, regaining their identity once school had ended. One thirteen year old girl expressed this with feeling:

I leave me outside when I come in school and pick myself back up on the way home.

Social spaces were heavily structured by rules and regulations that impacted upon well being, especially concerning movement around school and behaviour. The management of school space related to the use of both temporal spaces in the school timetable and physical spaces in the school building and on school grounds. Pupils felt restricted and unable to exercise autonomy because of what were often seen to be trivial, arbitrary, unfair and often contradictory rules. At the same time, it was often through the breaking of rules that pupils felt they could gain some control over an environment heavily dominated by systems of control and surveillance.

4. Key Concluding Points

- School was regarded as containing a complex of socio-physical spaces that held opportunities for pupils to forge new, meaningful and satisfying friendships with their peer group. Simultaneously these social spaces created opportunities for intimidation, aggression and bullying.
- The ‘climate of bullying’ was evidently experienced throughout the school by most pupils’ (Macklem, 2003) and the impact of this on emotional well-being is only just beginning to be realised. Moreover, daily social inclusion and exclusions are highly emotive experiences for children, sometimes culminating in loneliness as a critical problem for social development (Asher and Paquette (2003).
- The meaning and experience of socio-physical space in school was often underpinned by young people’s lack of autonomy, embedded within rules and regulations.
- For many pupils, aspects of socio-physical space had implications for who they felt they were and how they were integrated within the school environment.
- While schools may currently be designed with educational purposes in mind, the status of pupils in school is powerfully symbolised by the physical school, with lack of indoor space and control over use of space (see De Jong, 1996).
- From the young people’s point of view, there were few indicators of ‘healthy schools’ in terms of providing for the support of a pupil’s psychological and social development through the provision of secure and stimulating learning environments that permit self-expression, self-actualisation, self-confidence, positive self-esteem, fairness and justice.
- The research indicates the powerful role of place in the emotional well-being of children at schools and suggests that the development of schools as emotionally ‘restorative and healthy places’ require a much fuller understanding of the person-environment relationship, to include not just pupil and teacher behaviours, but also organisational change.

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