

A MINUTE WITH™ ...

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Philip Rodkin, professor of educational psychology

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The U.S. Department of Education is to convene its second national summit on bullying March 10 (Thursday) in Washington, D.C., bringing together President Barack Obama and members of his cabinet, youth, researchers, school officials and other groups to craft a national strategy for reducing and ending bullying in schools. Among the experts who participated in the summit was University of Illinois educational psychology professor Philip Rodkin (U. of I. educational psychology professor Dorothy Espelage also attended and presented her research.) Rodkin recently spoke with **News Bureau reporter Sharita Forrest** about his work.

The white papers submitted by Professors Philip Rodkin and Dorothy Espelage to the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention are available here.

In the white paper that you wrote for the summit, you mentioned a study that you have under way that's exploring changing school cultures. What does that involve?



At our University of Illinois site, we're in five schools right now – three in Illinois and a couple in Indianapolis.

My collaborator, Scott Gest at Pennsylvania State University, and I are exploring what teachers can do to improve their classrooms' social dynamics. We're examining what the social norms are in a classroom

or school – what the students actually think – and teachers' attitudes toward bullying, toward aggression generally, how they group kids and how that influences kids' emerging relationships.

Our thought is that the level of emotional support teachers provide, and how they deal with social dynamics can have a large effect on how kids get along, the norms for popularity and academic achievement and other elements of the peer culture.

Our idea is that if healthy peer ecology is engaged, then you're going to see more feelings of school relatedness, less bullying, and higher levels of academic achievement. Some of those effects are mediated by the society of kids – such as the student status structure and the pattern of animosities that are present.

We feel that peer culture is fertile ground for bullying and victimization – or for learning and engagement. And if there's anyone who can orchestrate and help manage that environment, it's the effective teacher. But teachers aren't taught about social dynamics; they're taught about mathematics or reading. There's a lot of social influence, social capital as a sociologist might say, in the classroom peer ecology that can be effectively harnessed or get totally out of hand.

What have you found so far?

Even at the earliest grades, it's more obvious than I ever imagined that there is a small culture in every classroom, and there are effective values that emerge from it.

We get the sense from visiting schools and talking with a lot of teachers, and from watching the dynamics between first-, third-, fifth-grade kids, that some teachers are much more proficient about knowing their students' social relationships.

The most effective teachers have what an old adviser of mine called an "invisible hand" that brings out the most in their students.

We hypothesize that the teacher doesn't only get to affect a child just one-on-one; it also happens through how the kid fits into the class and the kind of resistance or engagement that the class as a whole provides to learning.

We have at least two more years of data collection, but we're already showing that how the teacher interacts with students, their grouping strategies and their knowledge of peer social networks seems to bear some relationship with how that society is

structured and can foster more mutual friendships and connectedness. Teachers who give high levels of emotional support have students who are more engaged and the peer social hierarchy is more egalitarian.

The traditional view of bullying was that adults shouldn't interfere, that the bullied child needed to learn to stand up for himself. How does that type of attitude influence children's behavior?

Part of what makes bullying pernicious is that it seems to be an abusive relationship, not just a conflictual relationship. That's not the kind of thing anyone should ignore.

If there are two kids who dislike one another and one seems to be more popular or have higher status than another, or if you have a classroom where the popular kids tend to be aggressive, then that's fertile ground for bullying to emerge. If you have a classroom where most kids appreciate aggression, as long as it's not directed toward them, that contributes to an environment where bullying – not just physical aggression, but also verbal aggression, social exclusion, and cyberbullying – is seen as OK.

In the white paper that you wrote for the White House summit, you talked about two kinds of bullies, one of them being the socially connected bully who's popular and may be more difficult for adults to recognize as a bully. Why?

There's a stereotype of aggressive kids, who are described in a language of deficits. These are kids who don't fit in. And they're very visible because they appear dysfunctional. They go into either special education or the disciplinary referral system.

But then there are kids who have friends and are in peer groups. They may or may not be stellar students, but they are part of the social fabric of the class. They're hidden in plain sight. They can still be quite aggressive or encourage their friends to be aggressive. They can text and cyber bully.

These popular bullies reflect the norms and values of at least a segment of the school or the classroom community. When aggression is part of kids' values, then that's going to be reflected in the kids who emerge as the class leaders.

That's where it seems particularly important that teachers have that map of kids' social relationships. Then I think it's more difficult for these socially connected bullies to hide.

What can teachers do to be more attuned to the social networks in their classes and manage them well?

Teachers can ask kids about their relationships; compare their responses to the students' responses.

We want to implement interventions that make it easier for teachers to get information from students about who's connected to whom. We're also looking at more active steps that teachers can take to help structure relationships among kids, such as seating charts. Professional development for teachers is key to this endeavor.

What adults seem to under-recognize is that kids have potentially different values and motivations and may not share the teacher's perspective. Students may sign a pledge that says, 'I will respect my fellow students and use nonviolent means to resolve conflicts.' That doesn't necessarily reflect where kids really are, but, of course, it's where we need them to be.

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