



**Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access,  
Transitions and Equity**

**Bullying and School Attendance:  
A Case Study of Senior High School Students  
in Ghana**

**Máiréad Dunne  
Cynthia Bosumtwi-Sam  
Ricardo Sabates  
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Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access, Transitions & Equity

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## **List of Acronyms**

AIDS- Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome  
BBC- British Broadcasting Corporation  
BECE- Basic Education Certificate Examination  
CDC- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention  
CRC- Convention on the Rights of the Child  
CREATE- Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity  
DFID- Department for International Education  
EFA- Education for All  
GES- Ghana Education Service  
GET- Ghana Educational Trust  
GER- Gross Enrolment Ratio  
GSHS- Global School-based Student Health Survey  
HBSC- Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children  
HIV- Human Immunodeficiency Virus  
JSS- Junior Secondary School  
MDG- Millennium Development Goal  
MoE- Ministry of Education  
NER- Net Enrolment Ratio  
SS- Senior Secondary  
SSS- Senior Secondary School  
UK- United Kingdom  
UPE- Universal Primary Education  
US- United States  
UN- United Nations  
UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation  
UNICEF- United Nations Children's Fund  
WHO- World Health Organisation

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An earlier version of this paper was produced by Cynthia Bosumtwi-Sam as part of her dissertation to achieve a MA in International Education and Development during 2009. We are grateful to Sarah Humphreys for her comments and suggestions for improving this paper.

## **Preface**

This research monograph adds a dimension to the analysis of access to education in Ghana by exploring some aspects of bullying on attendance. Sustaining high levels of access to education requires understanding of both the supply and demand for education. Supply side issues (e.g. building classrooms, providing teachers and learning materials) are often better understood than some demand side issues (e.g. relevance of curricula and pedagogy to children's life world, motivation and sense of self worth and value). Issues concerned with safety, self esteem, peer support, and violence and bullying all influence demand and may be reflected in poor attendance and achievement.

Data from the 2008 Ghana Global School-based Student Health Survey are used to explore how attendance varies with self reported amounts of bullying at school. The analysis reveals surprisingly high levels of reported bullying and differences between girls and boys both in the incidence and responses to self reported bullying. Often the patterns are not simple to explain and involve interactions with emotional security and other characteristics of individuals. These invite follow up work to understand the dynamics of the social psychology the interactions between girls, between boys, between girls and boys, and between children and adults. All these shape motivation and may lead to circumstances that result in absence and an increased likelihood of drop out.

The paper therefore opens a door on issues that are expressed at the individual, classroom and school level that are likely to affect access broadly defined, and which may well influence the patterns of demand for schoolings, particularly amongst boys and girls most likely to be bullied. A reality needs to be made of the "child friendly" schools that UNICEF promotes. The "child seeking" schools that CREATE has argued for need to embrace the idea that sustained and universal access requires actions on both the supply and demand side that recognises push factors that may undermine motivation and self esteem in school environments that should be safe and supportive.

Keith Lewin  
Director of CREATE  
Centre for International Education  
University of Sussex



## Summary

This paper focuses on senior high school students and the ways that bullying affects their school attendance. Selected items from the 2008 Ghana Global School-based Student Health Survey are analysed first to explore the relationships between the duration and type of bullying and school attendance. Second, we investigate whether having emotional problems, in addition to being bullied, incrementally affects the relationship between bullying and school attendance. Third, we explore the mitigating influence of peer friendships on these relationships. In all cases we provide a gender analysis.

The results show that bullying is associated with increased absenteeism for both boys and girls. The analysis of reported emotional problems, however, shows distinct gender differences. For boys, increases in emotional problems are not associated with increased absenteeism for those who are bullied. On the other hand, for girls emotional problems were strongly associated with absenteeism and more so for girls who had not reported being bullied. The third strand of our analysis also showed gender differences in which absenteeism associated with bullying was mitigated by the support of friends for boys but not to the same degree for girls, especially those girls who had reported being psychologically bullied.

In addition to the threat to school access caused by bullying, the gender dimensions of the latter two sets of findings suggest a school environment in which peer friendship and emotional well-being are intertwined in complex ways. While there is little or no research within the Ghanaian context, supported by research from elsewhere, we suggest that peer friendships for girls may be comprised of more non-physical, social and verbal interaction within which it might be more difficult to pinpoint bullying. That peer interactions might include a mixture of support and bullying could explain why there is a strong influence on girls' emotional well-being and hence their school attendance.



# **Bullying and School Attendance: A Case Study of Senior High School Students in Ghana**

## **1. Introduction**

Physical and psychological bullying are prevalent in many schools. The global extent of bullying has been explicitly acknowledged in the international declarations and treaties directed at protecting children (and also adults) from all forms of violence. These include the United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; World Health Organisation (1999) *Violence Prevention: An Important Element of a Health Promoting School*; United Nations (1994) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*; UNICEF (n.d.) *Child Friendly Schools*.

In the face of the international mandate for safe learning environments, the reality for many school students is quite different. Many experience bullying and many other forms of violence on a day-to-day basis within school (see for example, Leach and Mitchell, 2006, Dunne, 2007). Bullying, aggression and other forms of violence in schools can blight student experiences of formal education and their abilities to make the best of the opportunities they have (Commission on Children and Violence, 1995; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; United Nations, 2005). More specifically, violence against students may result in higher levels of absenteeism (Rigby and Slee, 1993), greater truancy (Cullingford and Morrison, 1996; Green, 2006) and increased likelihood of drop out (Leach and Mitchell, 2006) which are described by Lewin (2007) as forms of silent exclusion from school, all of which contribute to less effective learning. Levels of absenteeism have been shown to increase with the severity of victimisation which in turn has been related to depression, anxiety, sadness, loneliness and general low self-esteem (Bond, *et al.*, 2001; Rigby, 2003).

Prompted by earlier qualitative case study research in Ghanaian schools (Dunne *et al.*, 2005), in this paper we use survey data to investigate how being bullied influences sustained school access. Our focus on attendance or absenteeism draws parallels to CREATE zone of exclusion 3 (for primary education) and 6 (for secondary education) which describe students at risk of dropping out from schools. In this case, our exploration concerns the ways that being bullied is linked to a cycle of ‘silent’ exclusion – low attendance, low attainment and at risk of dropping out (Lewin, 2007). While our main analysis refers to survey data collected from over 7,000 students in senior high schools, an important feature of this paper is the way we have drawn previous findings from qualitative case study research into our discussion.

The paper has three main analytical threads. First, we explore the relationship between the duration and type of bullying and school attendance. Second, we investigate whether having emotional problems, in addition to being bullied, incrementally affects the relationship between bullying and school attendance. Third, we explore the mitigating influence of peer friendships on these relationships by asking, are friends able to counterbalance the impact that bullying has on school attendance? Can supportive friends ameliorate the negative emotional impacts on young students and increase the likelihood of school attendance? Throughout, our use of a gender disaggregated nationally representative youth sample also allows us to explore the gender dimensions.

The paper develops in the next section as we locate our analyses within the evolving literature on violence in schools and in particular on cases of bullying in schools. Following

this we focus on the Ghanaian context in advance of a detailed description of our methods and approach to the quantitative analyses. Then we present the results for each of three analytical threads that frame the study as described in the preceding paragraph. In the concluding section we discuss some of the implications and refer to the wider literature to suggest spaces for further research.

## **1.1 Background**

Violence occurs in every country of the world and cuts across class, education, income, age and ethnicity, it is manifestly multi-dimensional, culturally defined and context specific (Furlong and Morrison, 2000; Leach and Humphreys, 2007). Violence against children has been widely documented and sadly it occurs in places where they should be the most protected, that is, in their homes, foster institutions and schools (UN, 2005). Research indicates that violence may be perpetrated by teachers, other staff and school mates on children through corporal punishment, other forms of punishment, sexual aggression and bullying (Leach, *et al.*, 2003; Dunne *et al.*, 2005; Leach and Mitchell, 2006, UN, 2005). While violence may be carried out by people outside these contexts, our specific interest here is about bullying in school as a form of violence carried out by both by teachers on students and students on their peers (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2003).

There is no universally accepted definition of violence but the WHO's *Information Series on School Health: Document Three*, provides the following description:

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, ill-development, or deprivation (WHO, 1999:2).

While the distinctions in the above definition might be arguable and overlapping, our main concerns in this paper are with violence against 'another person', in particular being bullied by ones' peers. Our primary focus is on interpersonal events in schools that might encompass intentional acts of physical bullying, as well as physiological bullying such as name calling, harassment and other forms of verbal abuse.

Interpersonal violence in schools has many forms and bullying is the most common (Olweus, 1999; WHO, 1999; and Rigby, 2003). It has been categorised as aggression or aggressive behaviour (Peets and Kikas, 2006) that is perpetrated by a more powerful person or group on a weaker person (Smith and Brain, 2000). Some researchers reserve definitions of bullying for repeated acts of aggression (Roland and Munthe, 1989; Whitney and Smith, 1993; Olweus, 1994; Smith and Sharp, 1994; Craig, 1998), but we prefer the definition provided by Askew who describes bullying as a "continuum of behaviour, which involves varying degrees of attempt to gain power and dominance over another" (Askew, 1999:61). This definition encompasses a broader range of intensity in interpersonal bullying that captures single as well as sustained, long term acts of aggression, as well as physical and psychological forms of bullying.

In its more overt forms bullying includes physical assault or verbal abuse, although it might also be more covert and indirect, carried out through relational manipulation or social exclusion including newer forms of cyber-bullying via the internet or cell phone (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Coyne *et al.*, 2006; Greene, 2006; Gini *et al.*, 2007). Some researchers using

gender analyses of violence among students have observed that boys tend to perpetrate physical aggression while girls use relational bullying or indirect aggression (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Owusu-Banahene and Amedahe, 2008). This has been contested by Peets and Kikas (2006) who report boys being both “directly and indirectly more aggressive than girls” and by Bhana (2008) who reports girl-on-girl physical aggression in South African schools.

There is a growing strand of research that has connected sexuality to violence. This is often referred to as ‘gender-based violence’ to connote violence or abuse based on gender and sexual stereotypes and also to connect it to sexism and patriarchy (Hyder and MacVeigh, 2007; Terry and Hoare, 2007). The term gender-based violence has been widely adopted although it might be argued that all violence is gendered (Dunne *et al.*, 2006; Leach and Mitchell, 2006). In schools, sexual harassment, often carried out by male teachers and male students on female students includes unsolicited acts of physical intimacy or demands for sexual favours with intent to offend, humiliate or intimidate (Wolpe *et al.*, 1997).

Again, this form of violence is manifest in a wide range of aggressive acts from name calling to physical assault to sexual abuse (Dunne *et al.*, 2006). Examples include telling dirty jokes (De Souza and Ribeiro, 2005), boys using words such as ‘bitch’ or ‘prostitute’ to humiliate girls, using the word ‘gay’ as an insult to other boys, inappropriate intimate physical touching and coercing girls for sex (Dunne *et al.*, 2006).

In a South African survey, girls report experiencing acts of aggression like beating and slapping by male friends demanding sex and a startling 30 percent of the girls stated that they were ‘forced’ to have sex the first time (Wood and Jewkes, 1997). Other research carried out in Southern African schools reported that girls were raped in school toilets, empty classrooms, dormitories and in hostels (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The male perpetrators of sexual abuse might include students, teachers, parents, relatives or other adult males within the community and while young females may be coerced into sex or raped, others engage in transactional sex in exchange for money (perhaps to pay school fees) and other favours (Leach *et al.*, 2003). Relevant to the focus of this paper, the prevalence of sexual violence in schools in West and Central Africa has been reported as contributing to girls dropping out of school either due to unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS or because they could not bear the aggression or degradation (UN, 2005).

Risk factors that make it more likely that a child will either be a victim or perpetrator of bullying or other forms of violence in school, include poor academic performance, high absenteeism, leaving school early and unstructured free time (UN, 2005). Resultant feelings of alienation and the risk of absenteeism or drop-out are often exacerbated by the bullying student peers (Rigby, 2002); an unfriendly school environment (Lewin, 2007) and the fear of physical violence in school from teachers (Marin and Brown, 2008). In a cyclical way, all these forms of violence are also a response to feelings of alienation. The 1999 Columbine High School attack in USA, which included the brutal massacre of 13 people, the injury of 23 others and suicide by the two senior high school assailants was revealed to be because they felt isolated and teased by their peers (Marshall, 2000). Learners who are generally made fun of, ostracised and targeted by fellow learners over a period of years may “... build up anger and hatred that finally explode into physical violence” (Marshall, 2000:133). Other examples of violence and serious crime by students in school include the 1991 massacre of 19 schoolgirls and the rape of 71 others by boys at St Kizito School, Kenya (Leach, 2003) and the eleven and 13 year old school boys in Arkansas (US) who were reported to have fired at

their classmates and killed four girls on their school play ground, as a result of rejection from a female classmate (Furlong and Morrison, 2000).

These sensational acts of violence highlight the significance of the psychosocial environment in school that includes the institutional norms and practices as well as the multiple relations between and amongst teachers and students (Gadin and Hammarstrom, 2003). A supportive and inclusive environment has been reported to have a positive impact on student well-being and academic effort (Marin and Brown, 2008). In contrast, poor psychosocial school environments can have harmful effects on students' health (Gadin and Hammarstrom, 2003) school enrolment, retention, and the quality of education (Leach and Mitchell, 2006; UNESCO, 2006). Forms of violence within the school context clearly compromise the learning environment, student well being and the right of access to quality education.

The first nation-wide survey of bullying in the UK carried out among 5-16 year olds from 1984-1986 revealed that 68 percent of the 4,000 children involved in the survey reported having been bullied once; 38 percent had been bullied at least twice or had experienced an outstandingly bad incident; five percent claimed it had affected their lives to the point of attempting to commit suicide or had run away or refused to go to school or had been chronically ill (Elliott and Kilpatrick, 1996, cited in Elliot, 1997). Subsequently, the UK Government introduced a school based anti-bullying programme *Don't Suffer in Silence* to develop whole-school policies on bullying, document children's experiences and mandate schools to develop and implement strategies to combat bullying (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 1999). In the US too, the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 includes measures to reduce levels of violence, as part of the larger plan to improve academic performance.

This section has presented a review of literature on school violence in general and cited studies that try to define categories of violence, to explore its diverse manifestations, to point to its impacts on students in schools and to suggest some ways forward to ensure a safe learning environment which is key to the global right of access to schooling. This has provided a justification for our analysis that focuses specifically on Ghana, in an exploration of the relationships between a critical indicator of school access –school attendance– with types and frequency of bullying, and then how these relationships are further affected by the experience of emotional problems and the support of friends within the school context.

## **1.2 The Ghanaian Context**

In Ghana the structure of formal education comprises a six year cycle of primary schooling, three years of junior high school (JHS) and three years in senior high school (SHS). The student survey responses analysed in this paper are from a nationally representative sample of SHS. A recent review by Akyeampong, *et al.* (2007) points to regional and economic differences that have produced uneven student participation in SHS, with rich urban dwellers having a higher likelihood of participation than poor rural dwellers.

While the national statistics on access, retention and outcomes are important indicators of national educational and development progress, they provide limited insight into the quality of educational experiences of students in Ghana. The importance of social processes has been highlighted in human rights approaches to development and is manifest in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), Health Promoting Schools (WHO, 2003), the EFA goals as well as in multi-agency advocacy for child-friendly schooling. This emphasis on processes

has also been reflected in the rise of qualitative and mixed-method case study approaches to research (see for example, Stephens, 1998; AED, 2002; Dunne, *et al.*, 2005). Of relevance to this paper, research on access in Ghana has directly connected access and drop out to the quality of schooling (Pryor and Ampiah, 2003; Akyeampong, *et al.*, 2007). Studies from elsewhere in sub Saharan Africa (SSA) indicate that being in school has often placed young girls and boys in difficult, uncomfortable and even vulnerable circumstances (Longwe, 1998; Mirembe and Davies, 2001; Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). In Ghana specifically, multiple case study research has reported institutional regimes in which various forms of violence were both part of formal disciplinary measures and more widely part of everyday life for students in school (Dunne, *et al.*, 2005). Analyses in the latter research and in another study by Leach, *et al.* (2003) provide ample evidence of gender violence in schools perpetrated through acts of physical, symbolic and sexual violence.

The physical violence of corporal punishment was found to be commonplace and meted out more to boys than girls. Despite specific policy regulation and the *Unified Code of Discipline for Secondary Schools and Technical Institutes* which states the offences for, and conditions in which corporal punishment should be carried out (Ghana Education Service, GES, n.d.), corporal punishment continues to be tolerated in schools. Indeed, indiscriminate or excessive corporal punishment was cited by boys as a major factor in truancy, absconding and drop-out (Dunne, *et al.*, 2005; Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah, 2009). A recent incident on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2008 in Adisadel College (one of the leading senior high schools in Ghana) starkly illustrates the anxiety and hostility felt by some students. A student was purported to have jumped to his death from the fourth floor of the school's newly constructed classroom block, to escape corporal punishment from the senior housemaster who had gone to the block to find students who had not attended a church service (Joy online, 2008). A student witness testifying before a committee set up by the minister of education to investigate the incident claimed: "some of the punitive actions meted out to students are too harsh" (Ministry of Education, 2008a:8). The report of the committee further stated: "There was evidence of fear on the part of students, that those who reported late for the common church service on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2008 were being caned by the tutors as punishment" (Ministry of Education, 2008a:10). Meanwhile the *World Report on Violence against Children* lists corporal punishment as one of the forms of violence which countries should take steps to abolish (UN, 2005).

Another common disciplinary strategy in Ghana, the use of verbal abuse, was cited by many JHS students as more psychologically damaging than the physical violence of corporal punishment. On the whole, interactions between teachers and female students were reported as less openly antagonistic although there is evidence that some male teachers engaged with female students in personal and even sexually suggestive ways (Kutor, *et al.*, 2005). Sexual abuse of school students by teachers and others is not uncommon in Ghana (Leach, *et al.*, 2003) and it has lasting damaging consequences for young female victims in and beyond school (Forde and Hope, 2008). Within schools students also contributed to a hostile environment through acts of sexual and violent assault. As elsewhere, bullying and intimidation were widespread among students. The situation in schools is unlikely to be uniform although research with teacher trainees in Ghana did also cite teachers' use of corporal punishment or conscious neglect of children as their most negative experiences in school. By contrast, they also referred to positive experiences that related to unique support they had received from teachers that had contributed to their personal development, well being, and learning (Akyeampong and Stephens, 2002).

This brief review of research in Ghana points to a rather hostile learning environment where acts of violence are commonplace and an accepted aspect of school life. It has also indicated that this impacts negatively on students. The analysis we present in this paper offers a development of this research by building on the insights gained through deep case study inquiry in an examination of national survey data. We focussed on SHS students and their personalised responses to violence in schools. Specifically, we investigate the relationship between being bullied and attendance, through examinations of the extent of the violence, the influence on school attendance, the students' personal response to the violence and the value of student friendships for personal support. As such, this research can inform educational policy and practice in a context where educational access and retention as well as individual citizen wellbeing are key strategies and conditions for national development.



## **2. Methodology and Data**

The main source of data analysed in this paper is derived from the 2008 Ghana Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS). This cross-sectional study included items on bullying, such as frequency and type, emotional factors, such as anxiety, sadness and loneliness, support from friends and school absenteeism among SHS students in the country. The Ghana GSHS employed a two-stage cluster sample design to produce a representative sample of students in all three grades of SHS. The first-stage sampling frame consisted of all schools, both public and private, containing any SHS class level. Schools were selected with probability proportional to school enrolment size. For sampling purposes, Ghana was divided into three zones representing all ten geographic regions: North Zone (Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions); Central Zone (Brong Ahafo, Ashanti and Western regions); South Zone (Greater Accra, Central, Volta and Eastern regions).

Twenty-five schools (both public and private) were selected from each zone. The second stage of sampling consisted of randomly sampling intact classes from each school to participate in the survey, within each sampled school a random sample of classes was selected. All students in the sampled classes were eligible to participate in the survey and weights were constructed to account for probability of selection as well as non-response. Total sample size for the survey was 7,137, comprising 4,017 boys with a weighted percentage of 56.3 and 3,107 girls with a weighted percentage of 43.5. The age of respondents ranged from 15-20 years across the three SHS grade levels.

### **2.1 Measures**

Our outcome variable was *absenteeism or unexcused absence* from school. This variable was obtained in a self-reported account on the number of days students missed classes or school without permission over the past 30 days. Possible responses were none, one to two, three to five, six to ten and more than ten days. Around 25 percent of girls and 28 percent of boys reported at least one day of unexcused absences over the 30 days prior to the survey.

Our main explanatory variable was *bullying*. The definition for bullying provided by the questionnaire was:

Bullying occurs when a student or group of students say or do bad and unpleasant things to another student. It is also bullying when a student is teased a lot in an unpleasant way or when a student is left out of things on purpose. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or when teasing is done in a friendly and fun way (Ghana GSHS Questionnaire 2008:6).

This definition of bullying includes more than simply physical acts of violence, but also psychological forms of bullying that may be enacted through verbal or behavioural means. It does not include corporal punishment, bullying or other forms of violence on students by teachers. Hence, the bullying considered in this monograph is exclusively peer to peer. The SHS students reported both the frequency of bullying and how they were most often bullied. Frequency of bullying was measured by the number of days the student was bullied over the past 30 days (a seven-fold classification from never to all 30 days). 41 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls were bullied at least one day over the past 30 days previous to the survey, while six percent of boys and four percent of girls were bullied over ten days during the same period. The kind of bullying experienced was measured by physical aggression, such as being

hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around, or locked indoors, psychological, such as made fun because of ethnicity, gender, religion, physical appearances or left out, and others not specified. Students reported the kind of bullying that was more prevalent to them. Of those boys who were bullied, 30 percent reported physical aggression and 38 percent psychological abuse. Girls also reported more psychological abuse (44 percent) than physical aggression (16 percent) as the most prevalent form of bullying.

The binary relationship between bullying and school absenteeism by gender is shown in Table 1. For each indicator of bullying, we present the proportion of boys/girls who missed one or two days, three to nine days or ten or more days. Hence, 15 percent of boys who were not bullied missed one to two days of school, five percent missed three to nine days and three percent missed ten or more days (first row in Table 1 for boys). This proportion should add up to 100 percent if we include the proportion of children who reported that they were not bullied and had not missed school (77 percent). For girls who were not bullied, the proportion of school absenteeism is similar to boys, with 16 percent missing one to two days, four percent missing three to nine days and two percent missing ten or more days and the rest not missing school at all.

As expected, the proportion of school absenteeism increases with the frequency of bullying. 22 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls who were bullied one to two days were absent from school for up to two days (Table 1). Similarly, 24 percent of boys and 21 of girls who were bullied up to nine days missed up to two days of school. But for the type of bullying we find some interesting patterns by gender. A higher proportion of girls who were bullied physically missed one or two days of school (28 percent) than the proportion of boys (20 percent). But, a higher proportion of boys who were bullied physically missed ten or more days (seven percent) than girls (one percent). The proportion of school absenteeism for boys and girls who were psychologically bullied is similar.

**Table 1: Proportion of school absenteeism by bullying and gender**

# days student has been bullied	School absenteeism (# days)					
	Male			Female		
	1 to 2	3 to 9	10+	1 to 2	3 to 9	10+
None	0.15	0.05	0.03	0.16	0.04	0.02
1 to 2	0.22	0.06	0.04	0.26	0.04	0.01
3 to 9	0.24	0.08	0.07	0.21	0.06	0.04
More than 10	0.21	0.08	0.07	0.20	0.07	0.04
How was student mainly bullied?	Male			Female		
	1 to 2	3 to 9	10+	1 to 2	3 to 9	10+
Not bullied	0.15	0.05	0.03	0.16	0.04	0.02
Physical	0.20	0.05	0.07	0.28	0.04	0.01
Psychological	0.27	0.09	0.05	0.24	0.06	0.03
Other	0.19	0.06	0.03	0.21	0.03	0.02

Source: 2008 Ghana GSHS. Note: Proportion of school absenteeism according to bullying type and frequency. Total within each row for each gender add to 100% by including proportion who did not missed school within 30 days previous to the interview.

The next variable relates to emotions, which was obtained from self-reported accounts of anxiety, loneliness and sadness. Information on the periodicity of anxiety and feelings of loneliness (how often young people felt these emotions while in school) was combined with information on feelings of sadness or hopelessness to generate a latent variable of emotions. Principal component analysis was applied to these three scales and the first factor was extracted to generate an index. The index has a scale from -2 to 3.1, it is standardised (mean=0 and standard deviation=1), and the larger the value the greater the reported emotions, in this case sadness, loneliness and anxiety. These responses to the school environment are presented in a variable called 'emotional problems' although we want to stress that the intention is not to personalise these in ways that suggest individual fault. We use this variable to test whether higher emotional problems change the dynamics of the relationship between bullying and school absenteeism.

Our indicator for friendship support was coded from the question on how often other students were kind and helpful over the past 30 days. Possible responses were coded as never, rarely, sometimes, most times and always. The proportions of boys and girls reporting support from their friends was very similar. At one extreme, 9.1 percent of boys and 7.7 percent of girls reported never receiving support from friends, and, at the other extreme, 28 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls reported always receiving support from friends, respectively. 38 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls reported that they sometimes received support from their friends. We use this variable to test whether friends can mitigate the likely positive relationship between school absenteeism and bullying.

Finally, the GSHS data contain other indicators that are useful to undertake multivariate analysis on the relationship between bullying and school absenteeism. These variables are age of student, grade level, attendance mode and parental educational background. Grade level was divided into the three SHS grades, with the proportion of boys and girls in SHS1 being around 20 percent, 40 percent in SHS2 and 40 percent in SHS3. Attendance mode differentiated between 'boarders' and 'day students', around half of children being day students with no differentials by gender. Parental education was obtained from merging information on the educational qualifications of the father or mother and selecting the one with the highest qualifications. Qualifications were divided into completed primary schooling or less, junior high school, senior high school and university. The distribution of parental qualifications for girls was a bit higher than for boys, in other words, a higher proportion of parents for girls reported having a university degree (29 percent) than for boys (22 percent) and a lower proportion of parents for girls reported primary schooling (13 percent) than for boys (24 percent).

## **2.2 Estimation method and hypothesis testing**

The first step of our analysis was to investigate the conditional association between self-reported events of being bullied with the likelihood of school absenteeism for boys and girls using an ordered logit model<sup>1</sup>. Two separate models were computed, one for the frequency of bullying and another for the type of bullying. We reported odd ratios in order to simplify the interpretation of the parameters from the ordered logit model (Long, 1997). The odds ratio is a way of comparing whether the probability of a certain event, in our case school absenteeism, is the same for two groups, in this case SHS students who have been bullied one

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<sup>1</sup> The model is conditional on age, parental education, school grade and attendance mode (day or boarder).

or two days against those who have not<sup>2</sup>. In this analysis we hypothesised that the odds of school absenteeism were higher for students who had been bullied, both by frequency and type, compared to those who had not been bullied.

We then explored the effect on the relationship between bullying and school absenteeism when we included emotional problems and friend support. Firstly, we hypothesised a direct association between emotional problems and school absenteeism whereby higher levels of emotional problems were associated with greater odds of school absenteeism. We also hypothesised a direct relationship between friend support and school absenteeism, but in this case the odds of school absenteeism would be lower for students who had been supported by their friends compared with those who had not been supported by their friends.

More importantly, in order to test the role of emotional problems in the relationship between bullying and school absenteeism we included the interaction between bullying and emotional problems. A positive and significant value for this interaction indicates that school absenteeism increases at a higher rate for children who were bullied compared with those who were not bullied as emotional problems increase. In order to test the hypothesis that friends can help to overcome the detrimental impact of bullying on school attendance we also included an interaction term. A negative and significant association of the interaction between bullying and friends indicates that friend support is more important to overcome school absenteeism for children who were bullied compared with children who were not bullied. Finally, we investigate the mitigating role of friendship support for children who were bullied as their emotional problems deteriorate. A negative and significant association of the interaction between bullying, emotional problems, and friends support indicate the moderation of friendship support on those who were bullied as their emotional problems increased.

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<sup>2</sup> An odds ratio of 1 implies that the event is equally likely in both groups. An odds ratio greater than one implies that the event is more likely in the first group whereas an odds ratio less than one implies that the event is less likely in the first group.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Bullying (frequency and type) and school absenteeism**

Table 2 presents results from the ordered logit model showing the estimated association between being bullied and school absenteeism, conditional on age, grade, attendance mode and parental educational background. Results are shown by gender and different models were estimated for frequency of bullying and type of bullying exposure.

As expected, we found that being bullied was associated with a higher likelihood of school absenteeism for boys and girls. With respect to frequency, we estimated that boys who were bullied for one to two days had 1.7 times higher odds of school absenteeism than boys who were not bullied. Girls who were bullied for one to two days had 1.8 times higher odds of school absenteeism than girls who were not bullied. In addition, the likelihood of school absenteeism increased as the frequency of bullying increased, in particular when bullying happened more than twice in 30 days. Boys who were bullied for three to nine days had 2.5 times higher odds of school absenteeism than boys who were not bullied. Girls who were bullied for three to nine days had 2.1 times higher odds of school absenteeism than girls who were not bullied.

**Table 2: Ordered logit odd ratios [standard errors] estimates of school attendance in SHS in Ghana by gender**

VARIABLES	Boys		Girls	
	Frequency	Type	Frequency	Type
Bullied 1-2 days	1.731*** [0.162]	--	1.799*** [0.190]	--
Bullied 3-9 days	2.556*** [0.290]	--	2.108*** [0.293]	--
Bullied 10+ days	2.473*** [0.386]	--	2.248*** [0.468]	--
Bullied physically	--	1.912*** [0.235]	--	1.979*** [0.339]
Bullied psychologically	--	2.534*** [0.249]	--	2.066*** [0.237]
Bullied Other	--	1.552*** [0.185]	--	1.732*** [0.227]
Age	1.130*** [0.034]	1.120*** [0.033]	1.140*** [0.044]	1.136*** [0.043]
Parental Edu (JSS vs. primary)	1.205* [0.129]	1.230* [0.132]	1.512** [0.245]	1.513** [0.244]
Parental Edu (SSS vs. primary)	1.473*** [0.171]	1.532*** [0.179]	1.863*** [0.304]	1.848*** [0.302]
Parental Edu (HE vs. primary)	1.197 [0.143]	1.219* [0.146]	1.397** [0.233]	1.408** [0.234]
Parental Edu (Unknown vs. primary)	1.106 [0.175]	1.166 [0.182]	1.316 [0.315]	1.369 [0.327]
Grade (SS2 vs. SS1)	1.966*** [0.211]	1.988*** [0.214]	1.405** [0.196]	1.411** [0.197]
Grade (SS3 vs. SS1)	2.271*** [0.260]	2.253*** [0.259]	2.160*** [0.328]	2.122*** [0.323]
School status (day vs. boarder)	1.764*** [0.140]	1.685*** [0.135]	2.365*** [0.229]	2.330*** [0.226]
Observations	3677	3653	2850	2836

Source: 2008 Ghana GSHS. Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. Estimated cut points not shown. Asteriks indicates significant at \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

With respect to the type of bullying and its relationship with school absenteeism, we found more marked differences between boys who were psychologically bullied and those who were physically bullied than between girls (Table 2). Boys who were psychologically bullied had 2.5 times higher odds of school absenteeism than boys who were not bullied, but boys who were physically bullied had 1.9 times higher odds of school absenteeism than boys who were not bullied. For girls, the odds of school absenteeism were 2.1 and 2.0 times higher if they were psychologically or physically bullied compared with girls who were not bullied respectively. The finding for the boys has resonances with qualitative research findings in Ghana in which male students reported a deeper and more damaging effect of verbal abuse

from teachers and expressed a preference for discipline through corporal punishment (Dunne, et al, 2005).

In all models shown in Table 2, the estimated association of confounding factors confirms some of the findings from previous work in this area. In particular, we found that older students were more likely to miss school (both boys and girls). The impact of age was also reflected in the association between grade and school absenteeism, with students in their last grade of SHS being more than twice as likely to miss school as students in the first grade. Another expected result was the association between attendance mode and school absenteeism, with day students having higher odds of school absenteeism than boarders. Interestingly, we found that students whose parents had educational qualifications above primary school were more likely to be school absentees than students whose parents had primary schooling or lower qualifications. This was the case for male and female students whose parents had JHS and SHS qualifications and for female students whose parents had university degrees.

### **3.2 Bullying and school absenteeism: Emotional problems and friend support**

We now turn to models where we incorporate our index for emotional problems and an indicator for support from friends. Table 3 presents results from the model on frequency of bullying and school absenteeism as follows. Column A introduces the indicator for emotional problems. Column B further introduces support from friends. Finally, column C is the model with interactions between being bullied and emotional problems, being bullied and having friends, and being bullied, having emotional problems and support from friends. We only present results from interactions that were statistically significant at least at a ten percent level.

**Table 3: Ordered logit odd ratios [standard errors] estimates of school attendance in SHS in Ghana by gender: frequency of bullying, emotional problems and friends**

VARIABLES	Boys			Girls		
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(A)	(B)	(C)
<b>Main Effects</b>						
Bullied 1-2 days	1.564*** [0.150]	1.506*** [0.145]	1.437*** [0.169]	1.622*** [0.177]	1.622*** [0.177]	1.638*** [0.250]
Bullied 3-9 days	2.003*** [0.239]	1.944*** [0.235]	1.614*** [0.267]	1.784*** [0.263]	1.801*** [0.267]	1.806*** [0.404]
Bullied 10+ days	1.939*** [0.315]	1.876*** [0.307]	1.823*** [0.407]	1.893*** [0.419]	1.853*** [0.406]	2.192*** [0.583]
Emotional problems	1.266*** [0.041]	1.255*** [0.041]	1.256*** [0.052]	1.255*** [0.049]	1.250*** [0.050]	1.393*** [0.072]
Friend support	--	0.632*** [0.050]	0.561*** [0.059]	--	0.807** [0.074]	0.744** [0.092]
<b>Interactions Effects (only significant interactions)</b>						
Bullied 1-2 days   Emotional problems	--	--	n.s.	--	--	0.754** [0.093]
Bullied 3-9 days   Emotional problems	--	--	n.s.	--	--	0.688** [0.110]
Observations	3595	3595	3595	2797	2797	2797
Source: 2008 Ghana GSHS. Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. Notes: n.s. stands for non-significant Asterisks indicates significant at *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1						

Starting with the model in Column A, we found that having emotional problems is associated with a higher likelihood of school absenteeism for both boys and girls. A one standard deviation increase in the index of emotional problems is associated with a 1.2 times increase in the odds of school absenteeism for boys and for girls. The inclusion of emotional problems reduced the odds ratio for the relationship between frequency of bullying and school absenteeism previously found. Nevertheless, for both boys and girls the experience of being bullied continues to be associated with school absenteeism even after the inclusion of emotional problems.

We further included in the model an indicator for support from friends (Table 3 Column B). Both boys and girls who have supportive friends at school have a lower probability of missing school. There seems to be a gender dimension, whereby boys with friends are 0.63 times less likely to miss school than boys without friend support, girls with friends support are only 0.80 times less likely to miss school than girls without friends support. This is to suggest that for boys support from friends has a stronger influence on reduced absenteeism than it does for girls. In Column B, we still estimate that there is a direct association of being bullied with school absenteeism even after the inclusion of support from friends and emotional problems.

Finally, when we estimate the model with interactions (Table 3 Column C) we found important gender differences. For girls, we found that being bullied and having emotional problems was associated with lower odds of school attendance. To explain this result we used both main effects and interactions. With main effects, girls who were bullied were more likely to be absent from school than girls who were not bullied. Similarly, girls who reported higher levels of emotional problems were more likely to be absent from school than girls who reported lower levels of emotional problems. With interaction effects, we found that the higher the level of emotional problems, the lower the impact on school absenteeism for those girls who were bullied (as indicated by the negative interaction between bullied and reported emotional problems).

To illustrate this result we use Figure 1. Girls who were bullied had a higher probability of missing school than girls who were not bullied, and this difference is particularly strong at low levels of emotional problems. As girls emotional problems increase, the probability of school absenteeism increases more rapidly for girls who were not bullied than for girls who were bullied, which is in accordance with the interaction effect found in Table 3 Column C<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This will not be the case for boys. Boys who were bullied will have a higher probability of school absenteeism and this probability increases with emotional problems at the same rate for boys who are bullied and those who are not. In other words, Figure 1 for boys will show parallel lines.



**Figure 1: Predicted probability of school absenteeism for girls in SHS with friends**

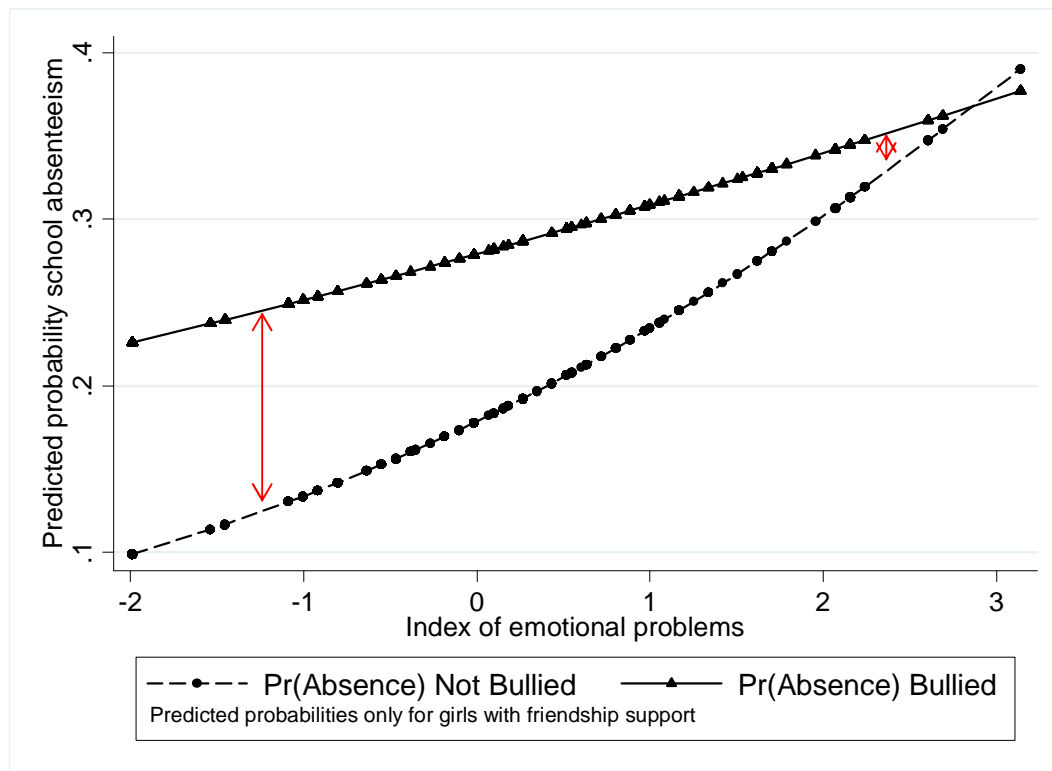


Table 4 shows the results for the model on type of bullying and school absenteeism with the inclusion of emotional problems and support from friends for boys and girls. We find that the relationship between types of bullying and school absenteeism remains positively and significantly associated for both boys and girls even with the inclusion of emotional problems and friends support. We also find that having emotional problems is associated with higher odds of school absenteeism and having support from friends is associated with lower odds of school absenteeism.

The interaction of type of bullying with emotional problems once again has a very important gendered dimension. The probability of school absenteeism increases at a lower rate for girls who have been bullied either physically or psychologically and in addition had emotional problems than for girls who had not been bullied and had emotional problems (as shown by the positive association of the interactions between bullying and emotional problems for girls in Table 4 Column C). This result is also illustrated graphically with Figure 1.

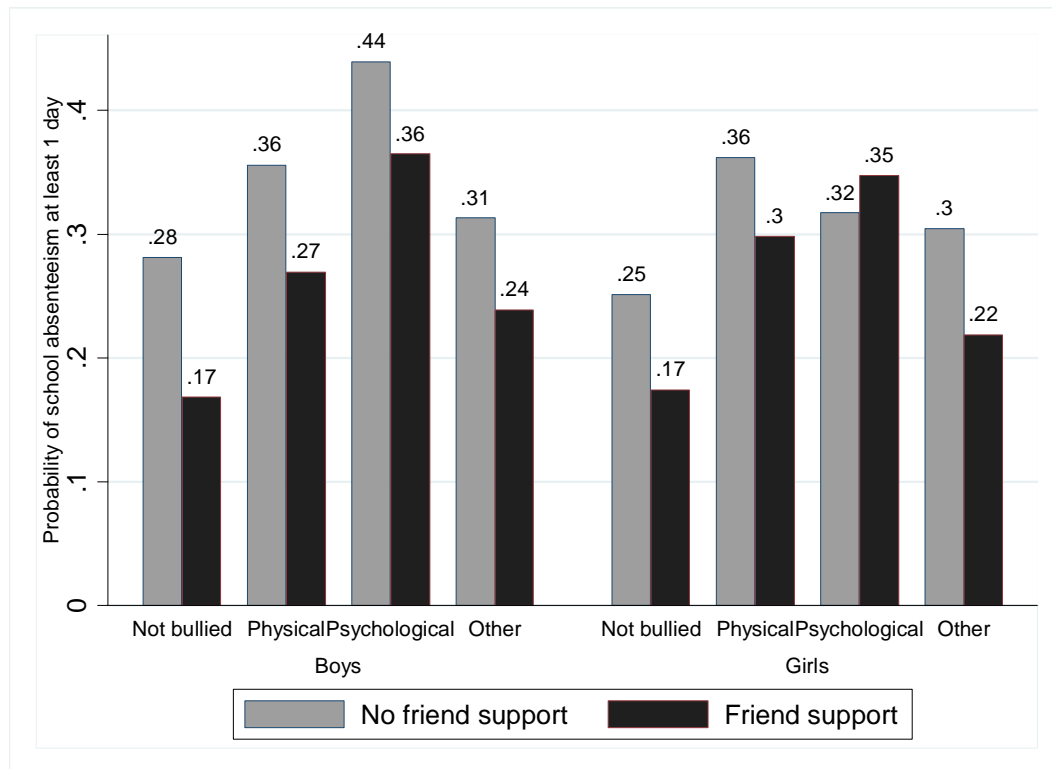
**Table 4: Ordered logit odd ratios [standard errors] estimates of school attendance in SHS in Ghana by gender: type of bullying, emotional problems and friends**

VARIABLES	Boys			Girls		
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(A)	(B)	(C)
<b>Main Effects</b>						
Bullied physically	1.507*** [0.195]	1.460*** [0.189]	1.280 [0.213]	1.734*** [0.310]	1.706*** [0.305]	2.052*** [0.524]
Bullied psychologically	2.132*** [0.217]	2.057*** [0.211]	1.865*** [0.246]	1.785*** [0.217]	1.787*** [0.217]	1.635*** [0.276]
Bullied Other	1.400*** [0.171]	1.352** [0.167]	1.239 [0.191]	1.531*** [0.206]	1.535*** [0.207]	1.699*** [0.319]
Emotional problems	1.275*** [0.041]	1.265*** [0.041]	1.267*** [0.053]	1.264*** [0.050]	1.259*** [0.050]	1.408*** [0.073]
Friend support	--	0.642*** [0.051]	0.565*** [0.060]	--	0.796** [0.073]	0.731** [0.090]
<b>Interactions Effects (only significant interactions)</b>						
Bullied phys   Emotional problems	--	--	n.s.	--	--	0.658** [0.136]
Bullied psycho   Emotional problems	--	--	n.s.	--	--	0.735** [0.102]
Bullied psycho   Friend support	--	--	n.s.	--	--	1.709** [0.444]
Observations	3582	3582	3582	2783	2783	2783
Source: 2008 Ghana GSHS. Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. Notes: n.s. stands for non-significant Asterisks indicates significant at *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1						

The model with interactions for boys (Table 4 Column C) showed that school absenteeism increases at the same rate and starts from the same level for boys who were physically bullied compared with boys who were not bullied. That is, the estimated parameter for being physically bullied is statistically non-significant as well as the interaction term. The same result is shown for boys who reported being bullied in other ways. For boys who were psychologically bullied, school absenteeism is higher (1.86 times higher odds of school absenteeism) than for boys who were not bullied. As emotional problems increase, the likelihood of school absenteeism increases at the same rate for boys who were psychologically bullied and for boys who were not bullied (this will be indicated by the statistical non-significant interaction term).

For the case of friend support, we find that girls who were psychologically bullied were more likely to miss school if they had friends. This result is contrary to the hypothesis that friend support mitigates the problems of bullying on school attendance. We illustrate this result in Figure 2. The predicted probability of school absenteeism is calculated for boys and girls, with and without friend support and for the different types of exposure to bullying. Boys with friend support have a lower probability of school absenteeism than boys with no friend support, regardless of whether they were bullied or not. This is not the case for girls. Girls who were bullied psychologically had 32 percent probability of school absenteeism if they had no friend support and 35 percent probability of school absenteeism if they had friend support. It is the only case where friend support changes the relationship between bullying and school absenteeism.

**Figure 2: Predicted probability of school absenteeism for boys and girls in SHS by type of bullying and friend support**



This analysis of emotional problems and friend support presents a complex situation and to help us here we refer to findings from case study research in Ghanaian schools (Dunne, *et al.*, 2005) supplemented by relevant research from other contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (for example, Adler & Adler, 1998; Duncan, 2004; Humphreys, 2005). As a start it is important to note that a significant finding from the ethnographic case study research in Ghana was that bullying and violence were often part of the everyday experience of schooling (Dunne et al, 2005). The normalisation of bullying and violence within schools opens the possibility of the non-recognition of particular routine violations as forms of bullying despite the description of bullying included in the survey instrument. Clearly research on what students regarded as bullying would be informative here but it was not available from the survey.

Findings from the Ghana cases studies show that schools are highly gendered institutions and key social sites in which students learn and act out their gender positions and identities. Given this context, the gender differentiated responses by students in the survey is not very surprising. Within highly gendered institutions, female students occupied subordinated positions and were subjected to routine violence (physical, psychological and sexual) most explicitly from male student peers and teachers (Dunne et al, 2005). Although far from conclusive, these qualitative insights begin to suggest some explanation for the levels of reported negative emotions, especially among girls. Although beyond the scope of the data analysed and discussed in this monograph, it would be worthwhile exploring the differential effects of different perpetrators on particular types of victims (e.g. female and male students and teachers). This would provide a means to develop better understandings of the complex ways that age and gender inter-relations influence the school environment and to inform interventions for sustained educational access.

The finding for girls that friend support does not appear to mitigate absenteeism associated with bullying is interesting and perhaps even counter-intuitive. In the Ghanaian context, the qualitative research describes gender regimes and the formal and informal processes through which dominant forms of masculinity and femininity are performed and regulated in schools. For example, verbal and physical space are differentially distributed by gender such that males tend to dominate the verbal space in classroom interactions and the physical space around the school (Dunne, 2007). Compliance with these norms is an important public signifier of gender identity and identification. Those who do not comply may be subject to coercion through institutional rules and peer pressure and risk forms of public ridicule (Humphreys, 2005). The formal and informal institution of the gender regime is then highly influential on social interactions between and within gender groups and may offer insights into the findings about girls and friend support reported in the analysis above.

While there is no recently published research on girls' friendships in Ghana, studies in other contexts are helpful. In the UK, for example, there is research that shows that friendships among girls are complex and contradictory, that is, they are not necessarily uniformly positive or directly supportive (see for example, Mc Robbie, 2000; George, 2007). Further, Hey (1997) suggests that the performance of compliant femininity by girls in public spaces belies difficult social and emotional inter-personal dynamics that themselves include forms of bullying. Research in Sub-Saharan African schools and elsewhere refer to 'gossip' as an aspect of female identity (Adler & Adler, 1998; Duncan, 2004), as problematic for girls (Leach et al 2003) and a form of bullying that is often not labelled as such (Humphreys, 2005). Although not specific to Ghana, these studies on the dynamics girls' friendship suggest some explanations for why girls who reported being psychologically bullied and received support from their friends also reported higher school absenteeism than girls who were psychologically bullied but did not received support from friends. Again the absence of direct evidence from the Ghanaian context points to a research gap.

## **4. Conclusions**

This paper set out to investigate the consequences of bullying in terms of school absenteeism in senior high schools in Ghana. As expected, boys and girls who experienced physical and psychological bullying in senior high schools were more likely to report unexcused absences from school than those who were not bullied. We did not find gender differences in the associations between school absenteeism and the frequency or type of bullying. Boys and girls who were physically or psychologically bullied were almost twice as likely to miss school as those who were not bullied.

Two main factors were introduced in the analysis to investigate the changes in the relationship between being bullied and school attendance. The first factor, emotional problems, relates directly to the experience of being bullied. Self-reported events of loneliness, sadness and anxiety, which could have been the result of being bullied at school, were analysed separately for boys and for girls. The main issue we investigated was whether emotional problems affect school absenteeism more intensely for children who experience bullying.

Our results showed an increasing likelihood of school absenteeism for boys and girls with higher reported emotional problems. For boys the effect of emotional problems on absenteeism was similar whether they were bullied or not. In other words, boys who were bullied did have more school absenteeism than boys who were not bullied, but as emotional problems increased, there was no incremental absenteeism for boys who were bullied. For girls, those who were not bullied were much more affected in their school attendance by their experiences of emotional problems than girls who were bullied.

Without further empirical evidence this finding is difficult to interpret but it does suggest firstly that bullying and emotional problems are more closely interrelated for girls than for boys and secondly that serious emotional problems could more directly affect school absenteeism in girls regardless of their experiences of being bullied. More critically, this raises questions about the problems of self-reporting and the potential for non-recognition of bullying. This seems feasible given the research evidence from studies referred to earlier that show the normalisation of violence, against girls in particular, within the daily school environment. For boys, there remains a distinction between being lonely, sad or anxious at school and, in addition, being bullied when looking at school absenteeism. Irrespective of increasing emotional problems, boys who were bullied would still be more likely to miss school than boys who were not bullied.

The second factor was support from friends. The main issue that was explored here was the possibility that friends could mediate the relationship between being bullied and school absenteeism. In other words, is the support received from friends more important in reducing absenteeism for those children who are bullied than for those who are not bullied? In general, the answer to this question was no. For both boys and girls, friend support was associated with reduced school absenteeism regardless of the experience of bullying. This was found in most cases except for girls who were psychologically bullied. For these girls, friendship support mediated the relationship between their experience of bullying and school attendance. But this was not in the expected direction. Girls who were psychologically bullied were more likely to miss school if they received support from their friends than if they did not. As discussed, the relatively under-researched dynamics of girls' friendships might provide some

explanations for this finding. Though not specific to the Ghanaian context, recent research suggests that forms of bullying are often integral to the complex dynamics of girls' friendships.

At the micro-level, the inter-relationships between bullying, emotional problems and friendships raised in this paper need much more detailed research that might suggest appropriate points for intervention to provide a safer learning environment for all students. Indeed, this monograph suggests that policies such as UNICEF's *Child Friendly Schools*<sup>4</sup> should look at the appropriateness of infrastructure, teacher-pupil relations, events of physical and verbal aggression and at a practical level encourage forms of student support or counselling to deal with bullying and its consequences, feelings of alienation and anxiety, to provide a safer environment for learning for all learners.

It is evident that many students are subjected to bullying within the school environment in Ghana. This not only describes an often unfriendly and unsafe environment for learning, it is also related to school absenteeism and therefore access to schooling. Both threaten the delivery of the right of students in Ghana to quality education and this may compromise the value of investment in the use of education as a strategy for development? There are gender differences in the findings: most surprisingly perhaps in relation to friend support mitigating absenteeism. It is evident that conditions within schools and among peers have important influences on sustained school access. This is a salutary message given that the student perspectives explored in this paper are those who have otherwise managed sustained access to senior secondary level and are thus part of a highly selected and educated proportion of their age-cohort.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF has developed a framework for rights-based, child-friendly educational systems and schools that are characterised as "inclusive, healthy and protective for all children, effective with children, and involved with families and communities - and children" (Shaeffer, 1999). See [www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index\\_7260.html](http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_7260.html) for more information.

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### Report summary:

This monograph analyses the effects of bullying on school attendance among senior high school students in Ghana. A strong correlation is found between being bullied and having poor attendance. The effects of emotional problems and of peer friendships on this correlation are then examined. For both boys and girls, having emotional problems is associated with poor attendance while having friends is associated with good attendance. Gender differences appear as these relations interact for girls, but not for boys. For girls, increasing emotional problems, even for those who do not report being bullied incrementally affected their school attendance.

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