No one likes a bully
How systematic is international bullying and what relationship does it have with mathematics achievement in 4th grade?

SUMMARY
- Children are bullied in primary schools around the world.
- The amount of bullying varies widely but, on average, nearly half of all children report being bullied at least once a month.
- Children who are bullied tend to do less well in mathematics.

IMPLICATIONS
- The TIMSS 2015 results clearly show that bullying is not isolated to one country. Rather, bullying is an international phenomenon that spans cultures and economies.
- TIMSS 2015 provides evidence of a strong international association between bullying and mathematics achievement at the fourth grade. Bullying prevention policies should be considered to ensure a safe learning environment where all students can meet their potential. Scholars and policymakers should work together on this crucial topic to reduce bullying and improve achievement.
- This simple analysis of the international grade 4 TIMSS results shows that bullying begins at an early age, and achievement gaps between frequently and infrequently bullied students also emerge in the early years of education. Bullying policies also need to begin in the early years.
- TIMSS provides an important resource for policymakers to monitor both existing and new anti-bullying interventions, and it is a rich resource to learn from others and monitor what works.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been rapid growth in understanding of bullying in schools and its many negative effects. The reported incidence of bullying and other school violence has increased over time, and UNESCO recently estimated that 246 million children and adolescents experience violence in and around school every year (UNESCO 2017). The TIMSS student questionnaire for grade four students provides a unique perspective on bullying around the world. In that over the past 20 years it has administered a bullying scale to 4th and 8th grade students from around the world. The reported incidence of bullying and other school violence has increased over time, and UNESCO recently estimated that 246 million children and adolescents experience violence in and around school every year (UNESCO 2017). This survey also shows that students who report being a victim of bullying and connect bullying is a systemic problem at the international level and that over the past 20 years it has administered a bullying scale to 4th and 8th grade students from around the world. The responses that students provided to the TIMSS 2015 student questionnaire provide a unique perspective on bullying around the world.

THE TIMMS STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The TIMSS student questionnaire for grade four students features an eight-item scale that asks individual students the following: (1) If you were hurt or told you to do something by someone at school. (2) If your friends are bullying you. (3) If you are afraid of being bullied. (4) If you are afraid of being hurt. (5) If you hurt or bullied others. (6) If you are afraid of being bullied. (7) If you are afraid of being hurt. (8) If you are afraid of being bullied.

Table 1: Student bullying reported by grade 4 students surveyed in TIMSS 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>About monthly</th>
<th>About weekly</th>
<th>Average bullying scale score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korea Republic</td>
<td>(10) (2.3)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>(11) (4.6)</td>
<td>(19) (0.4)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>(12) (2.2)</td>
<td>(21) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>(12) (1.8)</td>
<td>(19) (0.9)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>(11) (3.3)</td>
<td>(18) (0.7)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>(12) (3.9)</td>
<td>(19) (0.9)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>(13) (2.0)</td>
<td>(19) (0.8)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>(12) (1.9)</td>
<td>(20) (0.9)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway (grade 5)</td>
<td>(13) (2.6)</td>
<td>(23) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>(13) (2.8)</td>
<td>(23) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>(12) (2.9)</td>
<td>(21) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>(13) (2.8)</td>
<td>(23) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>(10) (2.3)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>(13) (2.8)</td>
<td>(23) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa (grade 5)</td>
<td>(13) (2.8)</td>
<td>(23) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International average</td>
<td>(12) (2.5)</td>
<td>(22) (1.0)</td>
<td>(18) (0.8)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BULLYING AROUND THE WORLD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

Findings from TIMSS 2015 4th grade provide a unique opportunity to explore the extent of bullying experienced by students from around the world. In this 2015 survey, the majority of students internationally reported almost never being bullied (56%), while, in contrast, 16% of students reported being bullied about weekly, providing ample evidence that bullying is a systemic problem at the international level and that bullying is occurring during the early years of schooling (See Table 1). The results also show highly varied rates of bullying that depend on the educational system. For example, 76% of South African students report never being bullied, while only 23% of South African students report similarly.
BULLYING MATH SCORES

TIMSS also provides perspectives on achievement differences across bullying levels. At one extreme, Korean students appeared to be highly resilient, given that mathematics achievement differed by just four points between the least and most frequently bullied. At the other end of the spectrum, Irish and South African students demonstrated dramatic differences, where the mathematics achievement gap was 59 and 72 points, respectively, between the most and least frequently bullied. Internationally, with respect to mathematics achievement in TIMSS 2015, students who reported they were bullied about monthly achieved 46 points higher on average than their most frequently bullied peers. In spite of meaningful differences in average achievement and bullying experiences, these two diverse countries share similar relationships between bullying and mathematics, suggesting policymakers in both countries would be wise to consider measures to address bullying. There is clearly much to be learned from these sorts of patterns.

The TIMSS results can be analyzed to identify the relationship between bullying and achievement (Figure 2). Examining country groupings in terms of bullying levels and achievement, Korea again stands out as a high-achieving country with low levels of bullying, as does Japan. Discriminable regional patterns are also apparent, as the Scandinavian countries all reported higher than average achievement and lower than average levels of bullying. An in-depth policy analysis of countries with these characteristics is merited as a first step toward identifying strategies to mitigate bullying.

The analysis also identified countries that could be considered at risk. In particular, some countries reported high math scores in spite of high rates of bullying. Although these countries might be regarded as resilient, it is reasonable to hypothesize that sustained high levels of bullying could eventually depress achievement, putting this group of countries at risk. An alternative explanation could be that the learning cultures in some high-achieving countries foster bullying behaviours. Either way, this situation is worthy of further exploration, particularly as it pertains to interventions or policies that might shift countries toward high achievement and low bullying levels. Also notable is that most of the countries that reported both lower than average achievement and higher than average rates of bullying were part of the Middle East and North African region (MENA). Again, such a strong regional pattern is worth further exploration in an effort to create a safe learning environment and, potentially, raise achievement.

From this relatively simple analysis of the international grade 4 TIMSS results, we conclude that bullying begins at an early age. Further, achievement gaps between frequently and infrequently bullied students also emerge in the early years of education. This important finding confirms that bullying policies also need to begin in the early years.

Figure 2: The relationship between national mathematics achievement and the percentage of students who reported being bullied at least monthly in TIMSS 2015

CONCLUSIONS

Educational policymakers should address the issue of bullying by carefully examining their own contexts and using interventions that are proven to work best in a given setting. To that end, it is important to recognize that TIMSS findings are just one piece of evidence in the international bullying literature and further research, especially at the system level, is clearly needed to identify potential interventions and policies that foster a safe, secure learning environment for the youngest students. Nevertheless, analysis of a large-scale assessment such as TIMSS, with many countries and representative samples, demonstrates that bullying victimization is happening across a wide range of heterogeneous countries, regardless of geography, dominant race/ethnicity, language, culture, and economic development. Further, irrespective of rank, in the majority of countries there were lower levels of achievement where bullying was prevalent. Finally, the longitudinal design of TIMSS, which assesses 4th and 8th grade students every four years, offers policymakers an opportunity to use TIMSS results to investigate bullying trends over time, within and between countries.
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


More about TIMSS


SELECTED NATIONAL ANTI-BULLYING POLICIES AND INITIATIVES

Australia

Ireland

Singapore

United States
www.stopbullying.gov

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAVID RUTKOWSKI
David Rutkowski is an Associate Professor with a joint appointment in Educational Policy and Educational Inquiry at Indiana University. Prior to this, David was a Professor of Education at the Center for Educational Measurement (CEMO) at the University of Oslo, Norway. David’s research is focused in the area of educational policy and educational measurement with specific emphasis on international large-scale assessment and program evaluation. David has collaborated with or consulted for national and international organizations, and lead evaluations, projects, and workshops on assessment in over 30 countries. He is currently the editor of the IEA Compass brief series and serves on several editorial boards.

LESLIE RUTKOWSKI
Leslie Rutkowski is Associate Professor of Inquiry Methodology at Indiana University. She earned her PhD in Educational Psychology, specializing in Statistics and Measurement, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Leslie’s research is in the area of international large-scale assessment. Her interests include latent variable modeling and examining methods for comparing heterogeneous populations in international surveys. In addition to a recently funded Norwegian Research Council grant on developing international measurement methods, Leslie is author and editor of the Handbook of International Large-Scale Assessment (Rutkowski, van Davier, & Rutkowski, 2014), co-editor of the IEA Research for Education series, and is currently writing a text book on large-scale assessment under the Guilford stamp.

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The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, known as the IEA, is an independent, international consortium of national research institutions and governmental agencies, with headquarters in Amsterdam. Its primary purpose is to conduct large-scale comparative studies of educational achievement with the aim of gaining more in-depth understanding of the effects of policies and practices within and across systems of education.

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Compass Editor
David Rutkowski
Center for Educational Measurement at Indiana University