

High school put-downs make it hard for students to learn, study says

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High-school put-downs are such a staple of teen culture that many educators don't take them seriously. However, a University of Illinois study suggests that classroom disruptions and psychologically hostile school environments can contribute to a climate in which good students have difficulty learning and students who are behind have trouble catching up.

"We need to get away from the idea that bullying is always physical. Bullying can also include verbal harassment, which can be just as damaging and detrimental to [student](#) learning," said Christy Lleras, a U of I assistant professor of human and community development.

The study used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and included 10,060 African American, Latino, and white tenth graders in 659 U.S. high schools. It is one of the first to look at the national incidence of verbal harassment in public and private high schools, she said.

"In looking at whether students felt safe at [school](#), students' fear for their physical safety was actually pretty low. But 70 percent of the students said they were bothered by disruptions in their classroom, and one in five students said that they were often put down by their [peers](#) in school," she said.

Lleras came to three interesting conclusions as she reviewed the data. One was that smaller, private, and more affluent schools do very little to

protect students from verbal abuse.

"I assumed that the sorts of school environments that protect students from physical harm would also protect students from emotional harm, and that was not the case. These 'safe' schools are not significantly reducing the likelihood that students will experience harassment by their peers," she said.

This was especially true for adolescent boys. The results showed that boys experience verbal harassment from peers more often than girls, particularly if they are in private schools, Lleras said.

Lleras also found that African American high-school students who thought of themselves as very good students were more likely to experience verbal put-downs from their peers, but only when they were in high-minority schools.

Why would high-achieving African-American students in high-minority schools face more verbal harassment? Lleras doesn't believe it can be entirely attributed to the oppositional culture hypothesis—namely, that high-achieving minority students are more likely to be negatively sanctioned by their peers for their efforts than white students.

She speculates that verbal put-downs in these schools may be a coping strategy that students use when they don't have the skills to do the work and have little hope of acquiring them in their academic environment.

"When high-achieving minority kids are put down by their peers, it can contribute to a climate in which lower-achieving kids fall farther and farther behind and must struggle to catch up. This hostile school climate isn't a cause of the racial achievement gap--we see evidence of the achievement gap well before middle school--but it contributes to it," she said.

"Sadly, verbal harassment is just one more thing these students have to deal with, and as long as we accept it because it's not physical bullying, we're doing a grave disservice to the kids who need non-disruptive and focused learning environments the most," she said.

The study was published in the *Journal of School Violence*.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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