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# School composition, school culture and inequalities in young people's health

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The socioeconomic status of a student's family and their school interact with one another to produce differences in educational outcomes. This can produce what is termed the 'frog-pond' effect, whereby the most disadvantaged students typically benefit least academically from attending the most advantaged schools. But is there also a 'frog-pond' effect for health outcomes in Wales?

## What we already know...

Previous research in Wales suggests there could be a frog-pond effect for some health outcomes. Whilst, as expected, behaviours were found to be healthier in more affluent schools overall, *within* these schools *family affluence* was much more strongly associated with health than it was in less affluent schools, suggesting that school-level affluence and family-level affluence interact to widen health inequalities in more affluent schools. Supportive school cultures, inclusiveness and positive teacher-student relationships may improve health behaviours, whilst reducing inequalities.



## What we did...

- We used data from the 2013/14 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey in Wales and its accompanying school environment questionnaire.
- We looked at how students' health behaviours varied according to their school's affluence (% of students entitled to free school meals). Within each school, we then looked at how students' health behaviours varied according to their family's affluence.
- Students rated the quality of their teacher-student and peer relationships and their involvement in decision-making. They also reported their physical activity, fruit and vegetable consumption, substance use and their general health and wellbeing.
- School commitment to health was measured by whether senior management team priorities included students' physical and emotional health and whether a written health action plan was in place and reviewed annually.

## In a nutshell

- **School and family affluence interacted to produce wider health inequalities in affluent schools.**
- **Students from less affluent families reported higher wellbeing when they attended less affluent schools, suggesting an adverse effect on wellbeing when students from poorer families attend affluent schools.**
- **Teacher-student relationships were most positive in less affluent schools and were an important element in relation to student health and wellbeing.**



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## What we found...

### School and family affluence and health

- Students in more affluent schools reported healthier behaviours, but not better wellbeing.
- Health behaviours were more unequal among students in affluent schools, meaning that school and family affluence were interacting to produce wider health inequalities in affluent schools.
- This supports the 'frog-pond' hypothesis that students from less affluent families do not benefit to the same degree as their more affluent peers when they attend an affluent school.
- Wellbeing among students from the least affluent families was greatest in the least affluent schools, suggesting an adverse effect when students from less affluent families attend affluent schools.

### School and family affluence and the school social environment

- The most positive teacher-student relationships were reported by the least affluent students in the least affluent schools and the most negative

relationships were reported by the least affluent students in the most affluent schools.

- Even students from the most affluent families report better quality relationships with teachers when they attend a less affluent school.

### The school social environment and health

- The quality of teacher-student relationships was an important factor in relation to student health and wellbeing.
- Wellbeing was also associated with the quality of peer relationships and involvement in school decision-making.
- Stronger school commitment to health was linked to smaller wellbeing inequalities, but not health behaviour inequalities.



## Issues to consider

This study included a large number of schools that are representative of secondary schools in Wales as a whole.

All the data was collected at the same point in time (a cross-sectional survey) so we cannot say with certainty that school and family affluence and the school social environment were causing the differences in student health and wellbeing.

The complex notion of wellbeing was measured with a single survey question.

The study was funded by Welsh Government as part of the World Health Organization's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. A Medical Research Council grant supported the data analysis.

## What does this mean for my school?

- **When students from less affluent homes attend a more affluent school, they appear to gain little benefit in terms of their health and wellbeing, despite exposure to the same material resources.**
- **Weakening boundaries between staff and students by improving teacher-student relationships may be an important way for schools to improve student health and reduce health inequality among their students.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3265/full>

Moore G et al (2017) School composition, school culture and socioeconomic inequalities in young people's health: multi-level analysis of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey in Wales. *British Educational Research Journal* 43(2): 310-329