



Teachers' Responses to Identity-Based Bullying: Social Inequality, Identity, and Diversity at Teacher and School Level

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Abstract

Teachers play a crucial role in addressing school bullying, yet many factors can affect their approaches. Identity-based social exclusion, where children are excluded by peers due to their stigmatised identities, is a distinct form of lower bullying rates associated with more detrimental outcomes. The social inequalities and power imbalances reflected in this type of bullying have shown to originate from multiple levels of a socio-ecological system. This study applies a socio-ecological approach to investigate teachers' responses to identity-based peer exclusion accounting for social identity, inequality, and diversity at teacher and school levels. Educators from UK primary and secondary schools ($N=422$) completing an online survey were randomly allocated to an identity-based social exclusion vignette targeting different identities (i.e. ethnicity, appearance, disability, gender expression/sexuality) and asked about their responses (i.e. victim-blaming, perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility, intervention likelihood). Characteristics of teachers (gender, LGBTQ+, ethnic/cultural minority, ethnic/cultural similarity to students) and their schools (diversity, socioeconomic status, teacher training and school support) were also assessed. Hierarchical regression analyses showed significant effects of teacher and school characteristics on teachers' responses to the identity-based bullying. Further, a series of school-type by vignette ANOVAs revealed some differences in teachers' responses by type of school and targeted identity. The findings highlight some of the teacher and school level characteristics that contribute to how teachers respond to different types of identity-based bullying among students, set against the background of a socio-ecological approach relating to social inequality and identity. Practical implications for teacher training and school-level conditions are discussed.

Keywords Teachers · School bullying · Identity-based bullying · Biased-based bullying · Bullying intervention · Managing bullying

Young people who belong to groups that are discriminated against or stigmatised in society are more likely to experience bullying victimisation. This type of bullying, which targets a person's social identity, is referred to as identity-based bullying (Tippett et al., 2010). The power imbalance that is inherent in all forms of bullying (Olweus, 1993) is

intensified in identity-based bullying, given the lower societal status of the stigmatised groups that the victims belong to (Pratto et al., 2006). Identity-based bullying has negative effects on children's and adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, health, and academic outcomes that are either stronger or additional to those of other forms of bullying (Fish et al., 2023; Hunter et al., 2010; Lawrence et al., 2024; Lessard et al., 2020; Sapouna et al., 2023).

Once a school accepts a pupil onto their roll in the UK, the school and the school staff accept a duty to safeguard the physical well-being of the pupil (Middlemiss, 2012). Teachers play a crucial role in preventing, managing, and responding to bullying, and in mitigating the consequences associated with involvement in bullying (Bauman et al., 2021; Burger et al., 2022). In the UK, the Education and Inspections Act (2006) requires schools by law to have measures to prevent all forms of bullying, although they

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have autonomy to choose how to implement this. In addition, the Equality Act (2010) requires elimination of discrimination or victimisation, equality of opportunity, and promotion of positive relations between people with protected characteristics (such as race, gender, age, disability, sexuality) and those without. These protected characteristics are identity-based features associated with disadvantage and discrimination, including bullying. As such, the requirement for schools to address identity-based bullying is particularly pertinent legally—reflected by the increase in UK schools including specific reference to this type of bullying within their policies (Kidawi & Smith, 2023; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2024). Relatedly, programmes such as The Equally Safe programme have been delivered in England to support schools to embed best practice for preventing and tackling identity-based bullying (Matasovska, 2023). School based interventions about prejudice-based bullying are missing in Scotland (see for one exception Willems et al., 2024). However, the Scottish Government in collaboration with COSLA has recently called for a joint action plan 2024–2027, on the basis of alarming reports (e.g. Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights [CRER], 2022) evidencing the under reporting of prejudice-based bullying incidents among pupils and teachers, due to misunderstanding of these issues.

The social inequalities and power imbalances reflected in identity-based bullying have been shown to originate from multiple levels of a socio-ecological system (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Higher diversity, equality, or minority social identities at various levels of a socio-ecological system may influence teachers' responses and elicit a range of supportive responses towards the victim when they witness identity-based bullying. Moreover, the specific identity that is targeted may affect how teachers react, for example, based on its position in a social hierarchy and associated stereotypes (Sapouna et al., 2023). Social exclusion as a form of bullying is particularly relevant to identity-based bullying because it taps into identity-based components, such as sense of belonging, and is often seen as less serious, thereby reinforcing the power imbalance or lower status of targeted groups (Killen et al., 2013). Therefore, the current study explored teachers' responses to identity-based bullying via social exclusion scenarios, with a focus on factors related to social identity, inequality, and diversity at teacher and school levels of the socio-ecological system. In addition, the teachers' responses to scenarios where different types of identities have been targeted, as well as school types related to age (i.e. primary vs. secondary), are compared in this regard on an exploratory basis. Thereby, the current study makes an important contribution in measuring a unique combination of variables, including different forms of identity-based bullying alongside school level and teacher characteristics.

Identity-Based Bullying at School

Identity-based bullying represents “any form of bullying related to characteristics unique to a child's identity, such as their race, religion, sexual orientation or physical appearance” (Tippett et al., 2010, p. 3). Although the attitudes associated with identity-based bullying tend to be targeted at an individual, they often reflect more general negative attitudes towards the group (Tippett et al., 2010) and constitute a form of discrimination against a minority group (Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Data from 17,112 13- to 17-year-olds recruited for the American LGBTQ National Teen Survey (Drescher et al., 2024) showed that the most frequent forms of identity-based bullying were related to sexual orientation (68%), gender typicality (63%), body weight (57%), gender (48%), race/ethnicity (30%), religion (27%), and disability (17%). However, it is not clear how different types of identities targeted may compare in terms of teachers' responses. This is particularly pertinent given that identity-based bullying is increasingly included in school anti-bullying policies, but there is inconsistency in whether or which types are mentioned (Kidawi & Smith, 2023).

Experiencing identity-based bullying is associated with disproportionately higher prevalence of disordered eating (Lawrence et al., 2024), depression, and reduced well-being (Price et al., 2019). Similar relationships have been identified for specific types of identity-based bullying: experiencing race-related bullying is associated with poorer mental health and increased risk of involvement in delinquent behaviours (Sapouna et al., 2023) and experiencing sexual orientation and gender identity related bullying is associated with poorer mental health (Fish et al., 2023). The impact of experiencing identity-based bullying also spills over into indicators of school performance and school adjustment. Sexual and gender minority adolescents who experienced greater school-based harassment had lower academic adjustment (Lessard et al., 2020), whilst those who experienced higher levels of racial bullying had lower academic achievement (Sapouna et al., 2023). Moreover, adolescents who experienced multiple forms of identity-based bullying also reported higher levels of school avoidance (Mulvey et al., 2018), feeling less safe at school, achieving lower grades (Lessard et al., 2020), experiencing delayed well care (routine medical check), forgoing medical care, non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and greater involvement in violence (Galán et al., 2021). Together, both the high prevalence of identity-based bullying and the range of associated impacts, especially for those with multiple stigmatised identities, mean that it is crucial that approaches to managing this form of exclusion are understood.

As bullying is frequently experienced at school, teachers are critical for preventing, managing, and responding

(Bauman et al., 2021; Burger et al., 2022). Understanding more about how teachers manage and respond to identity-based bullying and exclusion is crucial because youth who hold more marginalised social positions also tend to lack developmental assets at school (Lawrence et al., 2023). Teachers play an important role in supporting some youth who experience some forms of identity-based bullying, but not for those youth who experience the most severe bullying (Mulvey et al., 2018; Price et al., 2019), possibly due to less awareness that a situation constitutes bullying (Jones et al., 2014). Consequently, it is important to further explore teachers' management of, and responses to, identity-based bullying, and specifically in the form of social exclusion given this further exacerbates marginalised social positions (Killen et al., 2013).

Teachers' Responses

In terms of understanding teachers' responses to bullying, a range of variables relating to teachers' cognitions and feelings around a particular bullying episode have been identified as being supportive towards the victim of bullying. These include reduced victim blaming (e.g. Sokol et al., 2016), heightened perceived seriousness of the bullying (e.g. Ellis & Shute, 2007; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018), as well as enhanced empathy (e.g. Fischer et al., 2021), self-efficacy for managing bullying (e.g. Fischer & Bilz, 2019), perceptions of responsibility (e.g. Ellis & Shute, 2007), and likelihood of intervention (e.g. Begotti et al., 2017). It has been suggested that when teachers perceive a bullying event in general to be more serious (Begotti et al., 2017; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018), feel more empathy (Fischer et al., 2021; Wolgast et al., 2022), and have higher levels of self-efficacy for managing bullying (Fischer & Bilz, 2019), they have higher intent to intervene. Teachers also typically report that it is their responsibility to intervene when bullying occurs (Ellis & Shute, 2007). Thereby, those teacher responses which are generally supportive towards the victim appear to be associated with one another or co-occur.

From a theoretical perspective, how teachers respond to identity-based bullying can be informed by the social-ecological approach (Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011) based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The social-ecological approach recognises that bullying does not happen in isolation, but rather reflects a complex interplay between individuals, family, peer group, school, community, and culture. Aligned to this complexity, social dominance theory (Pratto et al., 2006) posits that in all societies, groups are organised into a social hierarchy whereby culture-specific norms or ideologies (i.e. 'legitimising myths') are in place to enhance or attenuate power relations between social groups throughout a society. As such, inequalities in power

relations or power imbalances penetrate through multiple levels of society at large (e.g. cultural policies and practices, individual relations). Societal inequalities on different levels of the socio-ecological environment are reflected in bullying behaviours at the individual level (Görzig et al., 2021). Therefore, in the current research, we explored how indicators of social inequality or diversity at the level of the individual teacher as well as at the school level may contribute to teachers' responses to bullying. A higher diversity and social equality at the different socio-ecological levels (e.g. teacher and school levels) may be reflected in equality-enhancing responses which support the victim of identity-based bullying. Similarly, teachers' own identity as a minority group member or affiliations with groups of lower power or social status in society may elicit more empathy and awareness, and thereby more supportive responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying (Drescher et al., 2024).

Teachers' Characteristics

Focusing on individual characteristics of teachers associated with minority status or diversity, research suggests that there is variation in how teachers respond to bullying. In terms of gender, for example, it has been shown that female teachers have higher intentions to intervene (Burger et al., 2015) or generally work with those involved to resolve bullying incidents (Bauman et al., 2008; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Yoon et al., 2011), are more likely to apply anti-bullying initiatives (Baraldsnes, 2022), and take the effects of bullying incidents more seriously, whereas male teachers were more likely to ignore the incident (Burger et al., 2015). However, it was also found that male teachers have higher levels of intent to intervene in hypothetical bullying scenarios (Yoon et al., 2016).

Teachers were also more likely to intervene in sexual and/or gender minority bullying if they held positive views about gender minorities and less traditional views of gender ideologies, were older, and had lower levels of authoritarianism values (Parker et al., 2023) or knew a LGBT person (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014). Yoon et al. (2016) suggested that teachers' willingness to intervene may reflect concern to avoid bias against particular ethnicities, or different expectations regarding male and female students and when culturally dominant and racial and/or ethnic minority bullies and victims are involved in the bullying episode. In terms of teacher characteristics associated with social identity, inequality, and diversity for teachers' responses to identity-based bullying, the current study focused on the relevance of gender, minority ethnic/cultural background, identifying as LGBTQ+, and similarity with their students' ethnic/cultural background. It was predicted that teachers' own identity as a minority group member or affiliations with groups of lower

social status in society may generally elicit more supportive responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying, such as reduced victim blaming as well as enhanced perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy for managing bullying, responsibility to intervene, and likelihood of intervention.

- **H1** Being female will predict more supportive teacher responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.
- **H2** Teachers' ethnic/cultural minority status will predict more supportive responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.
- **H3** Teachers' identification as LGBTQ+ will predict more supportive responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.
- **H4** Teachers' similarity with their students' ethnic/cultural background will predict more supportive responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.

School Characteristics

School characteristics are also likely to be influential in how teachers respond to identity-based bullying because the power imbalance evident in bullying interactions may be indicative of contextual-level social inequalities (Görzig et al., 2017, 2021). It has been suggested that, dependent on school ethos, heterogeneity and school diversity could serve as a protective factor for victimisation (Basilici et al., 2022). Indeed, there is evidence that race/ethnicity-based bullying is higher for ethnic majority children in schools where they were in the minority as power differentials changed with the size of the group (Durkin et al., 2012), and second-generation immigrants faced less bullying in schools with moderate ethnic diversity (Vitoroulis & Georgiades, 2017). In general, when associated with positive intergroup contact, diversity has been shown to reduce prejudice and specifically to increase intentions to counteract social exclusion and identity-based bullying among school children (e.g. Vezzali & Stathi, 2021; Vezzali et al., 2020).

Contextual level income inequalities have generally been linked with higher bullying rates, with bullying levels found to vary according to country-level inequality indicators (e.g. life expectancy, Gini Index; cf. Görzig et al., 2021), by individual level socio-economic status ([SES] Tippett & Wolke, 2014), by school-level SES (Badger et al., 2023), and further by SES of school neighbourhoods (Jansen et al., 2012)—the latter showing higher bullying levels being associated with lower SES. The level of teacher training and school support also influences how teachers manage bullying, by increasing their awareness and self-efficacy to intervene. Teachers who receive higher levels of training on their school's anti-bullying policy are more likely to intervene in bullying (Waasdorp et al., 2021), and those who adopt active action strategies to

manage bullying receive more social support and feel more prepared to address bullying (Song et al., 2018). Therefore, the current study explored how school diversity (students' ethnic/cultural background), school SES, and teacher training and school support are reflected in teachers' responses to identity-based bullying. It was predicted that a higher diversity and social equality at the school levels may be reflected in responses which are generally supportive towards the victim of identity-based bullying, such as reduced victim blaming, and enhanced perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy for managing bullying, responsibility to intervene, and likelihood of intervention.

- **H5** Higher school diversity will predict more supportive teacher responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.
- **H6** Higher school SES will predict more supportive teacher responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.
- **H7** Higher levels of teacher training and school support will predict more supportive teacher responses towards the victim in identity-based bullying.

Types of Identity-Based Bullying and School

Despite the wealth of research examining teachers' responses to bullying, it remains unclear whether or how these responses vary according to the type of identity-based bullying as well as by school-type related to age (i.e. primary vs. secondary schools). Different stereotypic perceptions held about specific groups are linked with different types of prejudicial and discriminatory responses dependent on their perceived status and competition (Cuddy et al., 2008) or place in the social hierarchy (Pratto et al., 2006). Similarly, different types of identity-based bullying can have different causes, discriminatory behaviours, and consequences for the victims (Görzig et al., 2019; Sapouna et al., 2023) which can further differ by context (e.g. country; Willems et al., 2024) and likely affect teachers' responses. Similarly, school policies that differentially address or mention different types of identity-based bullying may affect teachers' responses (Kidawi & Smith, 2023).

Exploring differences according to school-type is pertinent because it has been suggested that structural differences in the practices between primary and secondary schools may influence the management of bullying (van Aalst et al., 2024). Specifically, the tendency for less frequent contact with individual teachers due to pupils changing teachers for specialist subjects in secondary schools may mean that teachers have less opportunities to identify, observe, and influence incidents of bullying (van Aalst et al., 2024). Previous studies and reviews looking at age differences in

bullying report some cross-cultural consistency whereby victimisation rates show mainly downward or inverted U-shape trends with a peak during the age corresponding with the transition period to secondary school (10 to 12 years). Perpetration rates also mostly show inverted U-shape trends for girls and downward trends for boys (López-Castro et al., 2023). However, age groups have rarely been examined for identity-based bullying (Sapouna et al., 2023), and similarly teachers' responses to bullying incidences in different age groups are less clear.

Therefore, the current study explored whether there are differences in teacher responses according to the type of identity-based bullying scenarios as well as by school type. That is, four types of identity-based bullying that have been shown to be most prevalent (Drescher et al., 2024) are investigated (i.e. culture/ethnicity; appearance [based on weight]; disability [based on academic difficulties]; gender expression or sexual orientation). Moreover, differences in teachers' responses between the types of schools which differ by age groups in the UK (i.e. primary and secondary schools) are explored. A bullying scenario in the form of social exclusion is used to keep the type of bullying constant across conditions and given this form of bullying appears particularly relevant to identity-based bullying (Killen et al., 2013):

- **H8** There will be differences in teachers' responses according to type of identity-based bullying.
- **H9** There will be differences in teachers' responses according to type of school.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study is part of a larger international study on teacher responses to identity-based bullying, following a centralised study protocol (Trach et al., 2023). Here, we report on a subset of the data collected between November 2022 and December 2023 from the United Kingdom (UK) with slightly widened inclusion criteria compared to the international study.

Favourable institutional ethical review was established for both the international study and the UK study. To be included, participants needed to work in a teaching capacity (e.g. teacher, trainee teacher, or teaching assistant) in a school in the UK. Participants were recruited via a combination of opportunity, snowball, and self-select sampling. The study was promoted on social media channels (e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn). Existing contacts via institutional relationships (such as partner schools, and linked schools for teacher education) were also invited to take part via e-mail circulars and newsletters. In Scotland,

school contact was mediated via local authority permissions. One local authority agreed for the survey to be promoted to their schools. Personal contacts and known affiliates of the research team were also asked to promote the study. Individual teachers were recruited across the country as opposed to by school, and to protect anonymity, a teacher's workplace was not recorded; therefore, clustering was not an issue. A series of incentives were available, including optional prize draws to win cinema tickets and shopping vouchers. All participants had the option to join a researcher-practitioner network about peer relations, and they could also access a preview of in-progress aggregated anonymised data of selected survey responses.

Data was collected online using a Qualtrics survey. Respondents arrived at a landing page introducing the study and requesting initial screening information to check inclusion criteria. Participants were presented with an information sheet detailing the study aims and important ethical information. Following agreement to consent statements, participants were presented with a series of demographic questions to measure their personal characteristics (teacher characteristics) as well as school type and profile (school characteristics). They were randomly allocated to one of four vignette conditions, depicting a classroom interaction whereby a student is excluded by their peers due to their (a) culture/ethnicity, (b) academic difficulties, (c) appearance, or (d) gender expression (primary schools) or sexuality (secondary schools). Following the vignette, participants were asked about their perceptions of the scenarios. The survey contained additional questions as part of the international study protocol (not reported here), before ending with a debrief.

Using listwise missing data exclusion, 422 of 495 participants were included in the analyses. Missing responses ranged from 14 (victim blaming, likelihood to intervene) to 65 (training and school support, teacher empathy, responsibility, and self-efficacy) across the key variables of teacher and school characteristics, or any of the teacher response scales. Full case data analyses were performed to keep a consistent sample across the reported results. Of the analysed sample, 43.4% reported being female, aged 19 to 69 years ($M = 35.03$, $SD = 8.20$, 2 missing), 137 (32.5%) identified as LGBTQ+, and 78 (18.5%) identified as being part of an ethnic or cultural minority group. They represented qualified teachers ($n = 333$, 78.9%), teaching assistants ($n = 67$, 15.9%), trainee teachers ($n = 14$, 3.3%), and other educators ($n = 7$, 1.7%, 1 missing), based in primary ($n = 212$, 50.2%) or secondary schools ($n = 210$, 49.8%). For simplicity, participants are hereon referred to as teachers. The teaching experience ranged from 0 to 42 years ($M = 7.09$, $SD = 5.52$, 14 missing).

Listwise data exclusion did not affect the distribution of responses across school types ($\chi^2(1) = 0.02$, $p = 0.884$,

$N=495$) but resulted in a small but significant overrepresentation of qualified teachers (333 of 321 expected count) as opposed to trainee teachers (14 of 26 expected count) within the analysed compared to the excluded sample, whilst teaching assistants and other qualification types were equally distributed ($\chi^2(3)=43.31, p<0.001, N=493$). Other demographic variables (i.e. age, teaching experience, gender, identification as LGBTQ+ or a cultural minority group member) showed too many missing responses on those demographic questions within the excluded sample (i.e. 37 to 41 responses within the 73 missing cases) to analyse the pattern of missing data accurately. Note that missing responses on those variables contributed to the listwise exclusion initially.

Measures

The online survey was organised into blocks to measure participants' characteristics, details of their school context, and how they responded to the identity-based bullying vignette. The measures assessing teacher and school characteristics were developed by the international study's lead investigators in consultation with the research teams of individual countries as well as informed by established cross-national survey studies (e.g. Health Behaviour in School Children [Currie et al., 2010]; for details, see Trach et al., 2023). The vignettes and measurement scales that assessed teachers' responses and perceptions were constructed specifically for the wider international study on teachers' responses (Trach et al., 2023) but were informed by approaches used in previous research (see Craig et al., 2000; Fischer & Bilz, 2019; Starosta, 2022; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

Independent Variables

The following indicators of social identity, inequality, and diversity at teacher and school level were selected.

Teacher Characteristics Variables at the teacher level were gender, whether they identified as being part of an ethnic or cultural minority group (yes/no), and identification as being LGBTQ+ (yes/no). They were also asked about their ethnic/cultural similarity to their students (on a 10-point scale from 1 = *highly similar* to 10 = *not at all similar*), which was reverse coded for the analyses (1 = *not at all similar*; 10 = *highly similar*).

School Characteristics School diversity was assessed by asking respondents to rate how similar/homogenous the students were in relation to cultural/ethnic background (from 1 = *very similar/homogenous* to 4 = *highly diverse/heterogenous, multiple minorities*). As an indication of the school's SES, respondents were asked what best describes

the community that their school serves based on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*where people are the worst off, and have the least money, least education and least respected or no jobs*) to 10 (*where people are best off, have the most money, most education and most respected jobs*); adapted from Currie et al., 2010). The amount of training and school support they had received to help them manage bullying was assessed via two items, on whether they had received training or professional development on best practices in addressing bullying, and whether their school had clear policies about how teachers should address these situations (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) ($\alpha=0.70$). All school characteristics were reported by individual teachers (i.e. teacher responses were not nested within school characteristics).

Type of Identity-Based Bullying

Respondents were randomly allocated to one of four vignette conditions. Each vignette depicted a school-based scenario from the perspective of an educator, who witnesses an interaction occurring between students in class. In the vignette, Student Z tries to join a group of three other students as part of a class activity, but is refused entry by Student A. The vignettes had the same core stem, but key information was manipulated to correspond to five different forms of identity-based bullying: culture/ethnicity; appearance (based on weight); academic difficulties; gender expression (primary school only); and sexual orientation (secondary school only). An example of the culture/ethnicity vignette and key phrases for each vignette are included in the Appendix.

Following presentation of the vignette, as a manipulation check, respondents were asked why they thought Student A did not want Student Z to join the group. Available options included the following: 'because Student Z': (a) 'had academic difficulties'; (b) 'was overweight'; (c) 'was not masculine or feminine enough'; (d) 'was not heterosexual'; or (e) 'was from a different ethnic/cultural group'.

Teacher Responses

Following the vignette, participants were asked about their perceptions of the situation and their likely actions.

Victim-Blaming (2 Items) Respondents were asked to consider how likely it was that Student Z brought the situation on themselves, and how likely it was that the student contributed to his/her problems with their peers (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very*) ($\alpha=0.79$).

Perceived Seriousness of the Situation (2 Items) Respondents were asked how serious they thought the situation was,

and how important it was for them to address it (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very*) ($\alpha = 0.60$).

Teacher Empathy (4 Items) The extent to which participants reported empathy towards the students was measured based on their responses to four items, including ‘I would feel sympathy for Student Z’ and ‘I would feel concerned about Student A’ (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) ($\alpha = 0.73$).

Teacher Self-Efficacy (2 Items) Teachers’ sense of self-efficacy to respond to and handle similar situations was measured by how much they had confidence in their ability to resolve these situations and prevent these situations (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) ($\alpha = 0.68$).

Teacher Responsibility (2 items) Respondents were asked how much they considered it their professional responsibility to prevent these situations and resolve these situations when they occur (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) ($\alpha = 0.72$).

Likelihood of Intervention (1 item) Participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to intervene in the situation, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*).

Data Analyses

Descriptive analysis was conducted to check parametric assumptions. Next, teacher characteristics (gender; LGBTQ+ status; ethnic/cultural minority status; and ethnic/cultural similarity to students) and school characteristics (school diversity; school SES; and teacher training/school support) were correlated with teachers’ responses (victim blaming; perceived seriousness; empathy; self-efficacy; responsibility; and likelihood of intervention) to examine bivariate relationships. Then, a series of two-step multiple regressions were conducted with teacher characteristics (step 1) and school characteristics (step 2) as the predictors to the teacher response variables (victim blaming; perceived seriousness; empathy; self-efficacy; responsibility; and likelihood of intervention) to investigate the predicted associations. Finally, to explore the differences in responses to the type of identity-based vignettes as well as by school type, a series of two (school type primary/secondary) by four (vignette conditions: culture/ethnicity; appearance; academic difficulties; gender expression/sexual orientation) analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted, with each of the teacher responses as the dependent variables.

Results

Skew and kurtosis was explored for all variables. Values for skew ranged between -0.89 and 1.63 and for kurtosis between -2.09 and 0.31 , suggesting that although the data showed some deviation from a normal distribution, the values fell within the recommended range, especially given the sample size (see Kim, 2013).

Correlations Between Teacher Characteristics, School Characteristics, and Teachers’ Responses

Pearson’s correlations were used to explore the associations between teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and teachers’ responses to identity-based bullying (see Table 1). There were small to medium (Cohen, 1988) associations between teacher characteristics and teachers’ responses. Being female was associated with lower levels of victim blaming and higher levels of perceived seriousness, empathy, responsibility, and likelihood of intervention. Being from a minority (ethnic/cultural background) was associated with higher levels of responsibility. Identifying as LGBTQ+ was associated with higher levels of victim blaming and lower levels of empathy and responsibility. Finally, higher levels of ethnic/cultural similarity to students were associated with higher levels of perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility, and likelihood of intervention.

There were also small to large associations between some of the school characteristics and teachers’ responses. Greater school diversity (student ethnic/cultural background) was associated with lower levels of victim blaming and higher levels of perceived seriousness, empathy, and responsibility. Higher levels of school socio-economic status were associated with higher levels of victim blaming. Finally, receiving higher levels of teacher training and school support was associated with higher levels of victim blaming, perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility, and likelihood of intervention.

Teacher Characteristics and School Characteristics as Predictors of Teachers’ Responses

A series of two-step multiple regressions were used to explore teacher characteristics (step 1) and school characteristics (step 2) as predictors of teachers’ responses to the identity-based bullying. In step 1, the teacher characteristics of gender, minority (ethnic/cultural), LGBTQ+, and ethnic/cultural similarity to students were entered to test H1–H4. Teacher characteristics showed significant associations with all teachers’ responses (all $F_s(4, 417) > 3.70$, $p_s < .01$). In

Table 1 Correlations between teacher and school characteristics with teachers' responses to identity-based bullying

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Teacher characteristics													
1. Gender (0 = female)	.57(.50)												
2. Minority (ethnic/cultural) (0 = no)	.18(.39)	.02											
3. LGBTQ + (0 = no)	.32(.47)	.07	.11*										
4. Ethnic/cultural similarity to students (1 = not at all similar, 10 = highly similar)	6.01(2.27)	-.08	-.03	-.04									
School characteristics													
5. School diversity	2.02(1.02)	-.16****	.18****	-.06	-.18****								
6. School SES	6.22(1.87)	.10*	.07	.24****	-.06	-.05							
7. Teacher training and school support	3.66(0.92)	-.02	.10*	-.10*	.11*	.06	-.06						
Teacher responses													
8. Victim blaming	3.19(1.18)	.31****	-.09	.10*	-.06	-.33****	.19****	.10*					
9. Perceived seriousness	4.12(0.75)	-.30****	.01	.02	.21****	.14**	-.01	.21****	-.12*				
10. Empathy	3.74(0.81)	-.21****	.04	-.14**	.20****	.10*	-.09	.51****	-.14**	.43****			
11. Self-efficacy	3.65(0.87)	-.00	.05	-.08	.16****	-.02	-.06	.59****	.13**	.21****	.52****		
12. Responsibility	3.87(0.90)	-.20****	.13**	-.11*	.18****	.22****	-.09	.46****	-.29****	.37****	.63****	.47****	
13. Likelihood of intervention	4.22(0.83)	-.18****	-.03	.06	.20****	.07	-.01	.17****	-.11*	.53****	.31****	.22****	.34****

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; $N = 422$

step 2, the school characteristics of diversity (student ethnic/cultural background), school SES, and teacher training and school support were entered to test H5–H7. Entering the school characteristics resulted in a significant change in R^2 for all the models (i.e. school characteristics contributed to explaining teachers' responses above and beyond the teachers' characteristics). Moreover, some teacher characteristics (LGBTQ+, minority status) changed or ceased to be significant indicating that they were confounded with and possibly due to the school characteristics (see Table 2).

Victim Blaming

In step 1, teacher gender, minority (ethnic/cultural), and LGBTQ+ predicted victim blaming: being female and being from a minority (ethnic/cultural) predicted lower levels of victim blaming, whilst identifying as LGBTQ+ predicted higher levels of victim blaming. However, the effects of LGBTQ+ and minority status did not hold across school characteristics in step 2, whilst higher ethnic/cultural similarity to students appeared to be associated with less victim blaming when controlling for school characteristics, indicating that these effects were due to confounded school characteristics. Further, higher levels of school diversity predicted lower victim blaming, whilst higher levels of school SES and teacher training and school support predicted higher levels of victim blaming.

Perceived Seriousness

Being female and having higher ethnic/cultural similarity to students predicted higher levels of perceived seriousness in steps 1 and 2. At the school level, having higher diversity (student ethnic/cultural background) as well as teacher training and school support predicted higher levels of perceived seriousness.

Empathy

The teacher characteristics of being female, not identifying as LGBTQ+, and being more ethnically/culturally similar to students predicted higher levels of empathy in step 1; however, LGBTQ+ ceased to be significant when controlling for school characteristics in step 2, again indicating that these effects were due to confounded school characteristics. Teacher training and school support was the only school characteristic that predicted empathy: receiving more teacher training and school support predicted higher empathy.

Self-Efficacy

Teachers' greater ethnic/cultural similarity to students predicted higher self-efficacy in both models. At the school level, higher levels of teacher training and support predicted higher levels of self-efficacy.

Responsibility

All the teacher characteristics predicted responsibility in step 1. Being female, from a minority (ethnic/cultural), not identifying as LGBTQ+, and having high levels of ethnic/cultural similarity to students predicted higher levels of responsibility. However, similar to victim blaming, the effects of LGBTQ+ and minority status did not hold across school characteristics in step 2. For school characteristics, having greater diversity (student ethnic/cultural background) and teacher training and school support predicted higher levels of responsibility.

Likelihood of Intervention

Being female and having higher levels of ethnic/cultural similarity predicted a greater likelihood of intervention across steps 1 and 2, whilst identifying as LGBTQ+ predicted a greater likelihood of intervention when controlling for school characteristics in step 2 suggesting that this effect was masked by confounding school characteristics. In addition, more teacher training and school support predicted greater likelihood of intervention.

Teachers' Responses to Identity-Based Bullying Vignettes

To explore teachers' responses to the identity-based bullying vignettes to test H8, irrespective of their response to the manipulation check question,¹ a series of 2 (school type) by 4 (vignettes) analysis of variance (ANOVA) were undertaken whereby significant main effects for vignette were followed up with planned contrasts using effect coding (see Tables 3 and 4). The dependent variables were victim blaming, perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility, and likelihood of intervention.

¹ A series of 2 (school type) by 4 (vignette) ANCOVAs were run to control for whether when participants responded to the manipulation check they selected the reason that corresponded with the vignette. The analyses revealed a slightly different pattern of results with vignette only retaining marginal significance for empathy, $F(3, 413)=2.09$, $p=.101$, and perceived seriousness, $F(3, 413)=2.37$, $p=.070$. Vignette remained significant for likelihood of intervention, $F(3, 413)=3.59$, $p=.014$, when the manipulation check was controlled for. For school type, the significant differences for empathy, $F(1, 413)=8.35$, $p=.004$, and responsibility, $F(1, 413)=6.31$, $p=.012$, remained when the manipulation check was controlled for. Also, when the manipulation check was controlled for, marginal differences for school type became significant for teacher self-efficacy, $F(1, 413)=4.15$, $p=.042$.

Table 2 Hierarchical multiple regressions exploring teacher and school characteristics as predictors of teachers' responses to identity-based bullying

	Step 1				Step 2			
	Victim blaming	Perceived seriousness	Empathy	Likelihood of intervention	Victim blaming	Perceived seriousness	Empathy	Likelihood of intervention
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Constant	2.67*** (.14)	4.65*** (.09)	4.28*** (.10)	4.70*** (.10)	1.96*** (.32)	3.80*** (.21)	2.58*** (.21)	3.98*** (.24)
Teacher characteristics								
Gender (0 = female)	.72*** (.11)	-.44*** (.07)	-.31*** (.08)	-.28*** (.08)	.56*** (.10)	-.40*** (.07)	-.29*** (.07)	-.26*** (.08)
Minority (ethnic/cultural) (0 = no)	-.33* (.14)	.03 (.09)	.13 (.10)	-.07 (.10)	-.23 (.13)	-.06 (.09)	-.01 (.09)	-.15 (.10)
LGBTQ+ (0 = no)	.23* (.12)	.08 (.07)	-.22** (.08)	.15 (.08)	.13 (.11)	.11 (.07)	-.12 (.07)	.19* (.09)
Ethnic/cultural similarity to students (10 = high)	-.02 (.02)	.06*** (.02)	.06*** (.02)	.07*** (.02)	-.05* (.02)	.07*** (.01)	.05*** (.01)	.07*** (.02)
School characteristics								
Diversity								
School SES								
Teacher training and school support								
R ²	.12***	.13***	.10***	.08***	.24***	.19***	.32***	.11***
ΔR ²					.12***	.05***	.23***	.03***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; $N = 422$

Table 3 Teachers' responses by type of identity-based bullying vignette and school type

	Ethnic/cultural background		Academic difficulties		Appearance (weight)		Gender expression/sexual orientation		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Victim blaming										
Primary	3.35	(1.19)	2.89	(1.29)	2.87	(1.24)	3.45	(1.04)	3.12	(1.22)
Secondary	3.34	(1.12)	3.10	(1.19)	3.48	(1.07)	3.18	(1.11)	3.27	(1.13)
Total	3.34	(1.14)	3.00	(1.24)	3.13	(1.20)	3.33	(1.07)	3.19	(1.18)
Perceived seriousness										
Primary	4.14	(0.71)	4.16	(0.68)	4.20	(0.69)	3.79	(0.76)	4.08	(0.72)
Secondary	4.11	(0.77)	4.15	(0.80)	4.28	(0.67)	4.09	(0.83)	4.16	(0.77)
Total	4.13 ^c	(0.74)	4.16 ^a	(0.74)	4.24 ^b	(0.68)	3.93 ^{abc}	(0.80)	4.12	(0.75)
Empathy										
Primary	3.53	(0.82)	3.89	(0.75)	3.65	(0.81)	3.44	(0.69)	3.64 ^a	(0.78)
Secondary	3.82	(0.84)	3.84	(0.82)	3.97	(0.85)	3.71	(0.81)	3.84 ^a	(0.83)
Total	3.69	(0.84)	3.87 ^b	(0.79)	3.79 ^c	(0.84)	3.57 ^{bc}	(0.76)	3.74	(0.81)
Self-efficacy										
Primary	3.52	(0.88)	3.69	(0.78)	3.50	(0.82)	3.57	(0.74)	3.57 ^c	(0.80)
Secondary	3.63	(0.93)	3.77	(0.91)	3.84	(0.93)	3.70	(0.94)	3.73 ^c	(0.92)
Total	3.58	(0.90)	3.73	(0.85)	3.64	(0.88)	3.63	(0.83)	3.65	(0.87)
Responsibility										
Primary	3.56	(0.95)	4.02	(0.82)	3.92	(1.01)	3.59	(0.85)	3.79 ^a	(0.93)
Secondary	3.94	(0.88)	3.96	(0.85)	3.93	(0.90)	4.02	(0.82)	3.96 ^a	(0.86)
Total	3.77	(0.93)	3.99	(0.84)	3.93	(0.96)	3.79	(0.86)	3.87	(0.90)
Likelihood of intervention										
Primary	4.18	(0.75)	4.30	(0.84)	4.44	(0.65)	3.98	(1.00)	4.24	(0.82)
Secondary	4.21	(0.80)	4.39	(0.71)	4.17	(0.88)	3.95	(0.97)	4.20	(0.84)
Total	4.20 ^a	(0.78)	4.34 ^b	(0.77)	4.33 ^b	(0.76)	3.97 ^{ab}	(0.98)	4.22	(0.83)

For each dependent variable, mean values sharing a subscript letter differ significantly (^a $p < .05$, ^b $p < .01$, ^c $p < .10$)

Victim Blaming

There were no significant effects of school type or vignette for victim blaming.

Perceived Seriousness

There was a significant main effect of vignette whereby teachers rated the gender expression/sexual orientation vignette as significantly less serious than the vignettes about appearance, $t(418) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, and academic difficulties, $t(418) = 2.19$, $p = .029$, but only marginally significantly less serious than the ethnic/cultural background vignette, $t(418) = 1.90$, $p = .058$.

Empathy

There were significant main effects for school type and vignette. Teachers who worked in a secondary school reported having significantly higher empathy for the target in the vignettes than

teachers who worked in primary schools. Moreover, teachers reported having significantly less empathy for the victim in the gender expression/sexual orientation vignette compared to the academic difficulties vignette, $t(418) = 2.63$, $p = .009$, but only marginally significantly less empathy compared to the appearance-based vignette, $t(418) = 1.91$, $p = .057$.

Self-Efficacy

The main effect of school type on self-efficacy only reached marginal significance with teachers in secondary schools reporting higher self-efficacy than teachers in primary. There was no significant effect of vignette.

Responsibility

There was a significant main effect of school type with teachers who worked in secondary schools reporting higher levels of responsibility than teachers who worked in primary schools. There was no significant effect of vignette.

Table 4 ANOVA summary table for teachers' responses by type of identity-based bullying vignette and school type

	SS	df	MS	F	η^2
Victim blaming					
School type	1.89	1	1.89	1.40	.00
Vignette	8.38	3	2.79	2.07	.02
School type \times Vignette	10.14	3	3.38	2.50 ^{+(ns)}	.02
Error	560.14	414			
Total	4877.75	422			
Perceived seriousness					
School type	0.74	1	0.74	1.36	.00
Vignette	4.66	3	1.55	2.84 ^{*(+)}	.02
School type \times Vignette	1.53	3	0.51	0.93	.01
Error	226.79	414	0.55		
Total	7400.00	422			
Empathy					
School type	4.41	1	4.41	6.88 ^{**}	.20
Vignette	5.19	3	1.73	2.70 ^{*(+)}	.20
School type \times Vignette	2.50	3	0.83	1.30	.01
Error	265.67	414	0.64		
Total	6172.99	422			
Self-efficacy					
School type	2.66	1	2.66	3.53 ^{*(+)}	.01
Vignette	1.39	3	0.47	0.62	.00
School type \times Vignette	1.14	3	0.38	0.51	.00
Error	311.96	414	0.75		
Total	5937.00	422			
Responsibility					
School type	3.83	1	3.83	4.82 [*]	.01
Vignette	3.81	3	1.27	1.60	.01
School type \times Vignette	4.84	3	1.61	2.03	.01
Error	329.19	414	0.80		
Total	6675.50	422			
Likelihood of intervention					
School type	0.20	1	0.20	0.30	.00
Vignette	8.31	3	2.77	4.13 ^{**(*)}	.03
School type \times Vignette	2.00	3	0.67	0.99	.01
Error	278.09	414	0.67		
Total	7814.00	422			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, + $p \leq .10$

Superscripts in brackets indicate where significance levels changed when controlling for correctness of manipulation check

Likelihood of Intervention

There was a significant main effect of vignette for the likelihood to intervene. There was no significant effect of school type. Teachers reported being significantly less likely to intervene in the gender expression/sexual orientation

vignette compared to the vignettes based on appearance, $t(418) = 3.07$, $p = .002$, academic difficulties, $t(418) = 3.28$, $p = .001$, and ethnic/cultural background, $t(418) = 2.00$, $p = .046$.

Discussion

In line with the social-ecological approach (Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011), the findings confirmed that there were individual and school-level influences in the ways in which teachers responded to the identity-based peer exclusion vignettes. Societal inequalities at the various levels of the social-ecological system influence bullying experiences (Görzig et al., 2017; Pratto et al., 2006; Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011). We predicted that factors related to social identity, inequality, and diversity at the individual teacher and school contextual levels would influence teacher responses to identity-based vignettes depicting social exclusion among students.

Teacher Characteristics

The current study explored several individual teacher-level factors which were found to predict their responses to the different identity-based peer exclusion scenarios. It was predicted that teachers may respond more supportively towards a victim in identity-based bullying if they themselves identified as a minority group member or affiliated with groups of lower power or social status in society (Drescher et al., 2024). Responding more supportively towards the victim was indicated by lower victim blaming but higher perceived seriousness, empathy, self-efficacy, and responsibility and likelihood to intervene. In the current study, we examined participant gender, minority ethnic/cultural background, the similarity of teacher ethnic/cultural background to their students, and LGBTQ+ identity.

Consistent with hypotheses, we found that female participants responded to the vignettes with less victim blaming, rated them as higher in terms of perceived seriousness, reported higher levels of empathy with the target of the exclusion, reported feeling more responsible, and reported a higher level of likelihood to intervene than male participants. Previous research showed some support for female teachers being more likely to intervene or get involved in bullying (e.g. Burger et al., 2015) whilst others found that male teachers reported that they were more likely to intervene in hypothetical bullying situations (Yoon et al., 2016). Gender differences in relation to responding to bullying may depend on the nature of the bullying. For example, female pre-service teachers were more likely to intervene in all

forms of bullying except physical aggression (Dawes et al., 2024) and female teachers in a girls' school were more likely to intervene in indirect forms of bullying (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014). The current study focussed on social exclusion rather than physical bullying, which may account for the finding that female participants reported being more likely to intervene. The finding that female teachers reported less victim blaming, higher levels of empathy, and rated identity-based bullying as more severe than male participants also supports previous research (Ellis & Shute, 2007). It is important that teacher training relating to bullying addresses this gender difference in teacher responses as it appears to be a relatively consistent finding in the literature. For example, male teachers should be encouraged and supported to address these forms of bullying and specifically gain awareness of the seriousness and detrimental effects of relational or indirect bullying (Dedousis-Wallace & Shute, 2009).

It was predicted that the minority ethnic/cultural background of teachers may have an influence on the ways in which they responded to exclusion, such that they would indicate more supportive responses towards the victim. Teachers who reported that they were from a minority ethnic/cultural background endorsed lower levels of victim blaming in the scenarios and reported feeling higher levels of responsibility to intervene. However, once school-level factors were considered, these effects were reduced to being marginal. Both effects appear to be because ethnic/cultural minority teachers were more likely to be working at high diversity schools in this sample, whilst the effect on responsibility seems additionally confounded with minority teachers being more likely to work at schools where they receive more training and support. Previous studies have argued that teachers from minority ethnic/cultural backgrounds may be more aware of identity-based bullying and feel more empathy toward the targets of this harassment, meaning that they may be more likely to intervene in these situations (Drescher et al., 2024). However, it appears that contextual factors may be important as well in understanding teachers' responses.

The current study found that teachers' similarity to their students' ethnic/cultural background, rather than their minority ethnic/cultural background per se, was a factor that predicted their responses to the identity-based exclusion vignettes. In line with our predictions, teachers who reported higher levels of similarity to their students in terms of their ethnic/cultural background endorsed lower levels of victim blaming (although only when potentially confounded school level variables, such as diversity and SES, were controlled for). They also reported higher perceived severity of the exclusion, more empathy for the target of the exclusion, higher levels of self-efficacy in dealing with the exclusion, higher perceived responsibility for addressing the issue, and being more likely to intervene. As Drescher et al. (2024) note, individuals who report similar identities

to their students are more likely to relate to their experiences and may be more sensitive to their experiences of bullying. Thus, they may feel more empathy in these situations and feel more able and more likely to intervene.

In our initial analyses, contrary to hypotheses, teachers who were LGBTQ+ reported higher levels of victim blaming, lower levels of empathy towards the target of the social exclusion, and lower levels of responsibility for intervening. However, these factors ceased to be significant and instead, consistent with hypotheses, teachers' LGBTQ+ identity became predictive of a higher likelihood to intervene when school level factors (e.g. school SES, training and support provided by the school) were accounted for. It is likely that this reflects the finding that teachers who were LGBTQ+ in our sample tended to be working in schools with higher SES intakes and with lower levels of training and support. It appears that these contextual factors, rather than LGBTQ+ identity, were predictive of the initial non-supportive responses. These findings are in contrast with research which has suggested that some LGBTQ+ teachers may find it difficult to intervene when their students experience homophobic bullying as they may feel too vulnerable to be able to do something in these instances (Sykes, 2004). However, this study is relatively dated now, and attitudes towards sexual minorities have become more positive within the UK over the past 20 years (Pew Research Center, 2020); however, see also our discussion of the findings regarding the exclusion based on gender expression or sexual orientation vignettes below. Given that the school-level data in the current study are reported by the teachers themselves, it may be the case that LGBTQ+ teachers are highlighting a perceived gap in their training needs within the schools where they work possibly due to their enhanced awareness as minority group members.

School Characteristics

When looking at the broader context of the school setting, school-level factors were also found to be predictive of teachers' responses to the vignettes. In the current study, we explored the impact of school ethnic and cultural diversity, the SES of the school community, and the level of teacher training and perceived school support.

In line with hypotheses, higher school diversity in terms of the student ethnic/cultural background was found to predict more supportive responses to identity-based bullying; teachers working in schools which they perceived to be more diverse endorsed lower levels of victim blaming, indicated that they felt that exclusion was more serious, and felt higher levels of responsibility to act. These findings support those of Drescher et al. (2024) with the expectation that if there is more diversity at the school level, then there may be more support from teachers in relation to addressing

identity-based bullying. These findings further suggest that positive intergroup contact may take place for teachers at more diverse schools which could contribute to lower prejudice and increase behaviours in support of bullying interventions (e.g. Vezzali & Stathi, 2021; Vezzali et al., 2020).

Contrary to hypotheses, the SES of the school only significantly predicted teachers' victim blaming; teachers in higher SES schools endorsed higher levels of victim blaming. In the previous literature, higher SES was generally associated with lower bullying rates (Badger et al., 2023; Jansen et al., 2012; Tippett & Wolke, 2014); however, this may not correspond with teachers' responses to those incidences. Teachers may feel that students within a higher SES environment may generally be less vulnerable to identity-based exclusion and may therefore be more likely to think that they had somehow provoked the bullies. It may also be that teachers are affected by the overall school culture in the form of hierarchy-maintaining or attenuating ideologies which may vary by SES contexts and generally affect the prevalence of bullying incidences (Görzig et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2012; Tippett & Wolke, 2014). Teachers' levels of attribution of blame may be a reflection of maintaining or levelling of power relations between groups in line with the school's culture (Pratto et al., 2006; Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011). However, it is worth noting that there was no association between school SES and the other teacher response variables. It is also possible that other factors may be leading to these results. For example, the current study noted that higher levels of perceived support and training by teaching staff were associated with more victim blaming (see below), which may mean that teachers are more aware of issues around provocation in bullying (Carvalho et al., 2017). However, these findings deserve further investigation.

As predicted, higher levels of teacher training and school support predicted more supportive teacher responses to identity-based bullying. Higher levels of training and support were associated with teachers reporting more empathy for the target of the exclusion, higher levels of perceived severity of the scenario, higher levels of self-efficacy in dealing with this, feeling more responsibility, and endorsing an increased likelihood to intervene. It is likely that this training and support may enhance teachers' feelings of self-efficacy in addressing bullying, and also reflect stronger support from the senior leadership team towards anti-bullying work within the school that may empower teachers to deal with bullying (Ahtola et al., 2013).

Somewhat in contrast to predictions, in schools where there were higher levels of training and support, teachers endorsed more victim blaming for the exclusion. This is an interesting finding given the more supportive responses associated with school training and support reported above and appears contradictory. It is possible that the measure of victim blaming

used in the current study, assessing whether the target of the bullying may have brought the situation on themselves or contributed to the problem, is capturing some of the nuances that teachers identify in bullying, with teachers acknowledging that there are some circumstances where children may be behaving in a way that may be viewed as provoking the bullying (Carvalho et al., 2017). The scenarios presented in the current study did not provide any context for the targeted individual behaving in this way, but this may have been inferred by some teachers, and teachers who have received more training in relation to bullying may be more aware or sensitive to some of the complexities of social interactions.

The general finding here that teachers are more concerned about identity-based bullying and better equipped to address this issue in schools where they have received more teacher training and support is not necessarily surprising. However, what it does highlight is the need for teachers to feel that they have the tools to deal with these forms of bullying as well as a supportive environment in which to be able to respond. These results reinforce the importance of anti-bullying training and policies at schools which explicitly address identity-based bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2018).

Types of Identity-Based Bullying and School

Differences in responses were also examined in relation to the different forms of identity-based bullying. There were few differences in the ways in which participants responded to the different scenarios pertaining to perceived seriousness, empathy with the victim, and likelihood to intervene. Teachers rated exclusion based on gender expression or sexual orientation as less serious compared to exclusion related to appearance or academic difficulties; they also reported lower levels of empathy for exclusion based on gender expression or sexual orientation compared to exclusion related to academic difficulties. Furthermore, they reported a lower likelihood to intervene for the vignette describing exclusion related to gender expression or sexual orientation compared to the vignettes illustrating exclusion linked to appearance, academic difficulties, or ethnic cultural background. However, the findings for perceived seriousness and empathy only remained marginally significant when the manipulation check was controlled for. Manipulation checks were carried out as part of this research to examine whether participants were able to identify the reason for the exclusion. Controlling for manipulation checks is standard within many experimental studies. However, there are also concerns with the reliance on manipulation checks; for example, Varaine (2023) has suggested that their use may actually bias results and recommends the use of measures of attention rather than use of manipulation checks. Thus, for transparency, we have reported both sets of results: those without the manipulation checks and those controlling for them.

These findings warrant further investigation but overall, the relatively less supportive responses of teachers towards the gender expression or sexual orientation-based exclusion scenarios appear somewhat evident albeit at times only marginally significant. It may be that teachers are less confident to intervene given that gender expression or sexual orientation related issues may be more controversial in the public discourse and make teachers reluctant to act. In England, coverage of LGBT and gender identity in the curriculum has been contentious, with protests sparking a government review (McSorley & Dunkley, 2024), meaning teachers may be even more wary about tackling these issues directly. In addition, some research has indicated that educators may attribute LGBTQ+ bullying more towards characteristics of the victim, and utilise different intervention strategies (Elipe et al., 2023). Drawing from research on stigma by association (Neuberg et al., 1994), O'Higgins-Norman (2009) noted that some school staff were reticent to address homophobic bullying because of their concerns about what it might imply to others about their own sexuality. This ties in with research which has shown that straight allies are viewed differently by non-allies as a result of their support for the LGBTQ+ community (Goldstein, 2017). However, young people with LGBTQ identities are at greater risk of bullying, and experience profound negative effects (Black et al., 2023; Elipe et al., 2022; Espino et al., 2023; O'Malley et al., 2022), so it is paramount that school staff address these issues effectively to avoid them escalating. In this regard, a recent review of factors associated with LGBTQ+ bullying reported that anti-homophobia policies in the school, social support, a sense of school belonging, and gay-straight alliances can act as protective factors (Espino et al., 2023). Our findings suggest that bullying relating to gender identity and sexual orientation needs more attention in educator training, with clearer guidance for teachers about possible intervention strategies.

We also examined whether there were differences in the responses given by teachers who were based in primary or secondary schools. In contrast to teachers in primary schools, teachers in secondary schools generally reported more empathy with the target of the identity-based exclusion and felt more responsibility to act. It may be that these forms of bullying vary with age. In their recent systematic review of bullying victimisation related to racial/cultural background, Sapouna et al. (2023) noted that few studies have examined age differences in the experiences of children and young people. Only one study had reported on this, and only among an adolescent sample (11–16 years old), although they indicated that younger adolescents were at greater risk (Monks et al., 2008). Fish et al. (2023) reported that LGB students aged 11 years and younger were at a higher risk of homophobic bullying than older students. However, the lower end of the age range of this group was not clear. It is possible that the primary school teachers in our sample were

working with children much younger than this age (in the UK, primary education is from 4–11 years). Another review on bullying in general indicated that bullying victimisation as well as perpetration (for girls) has been shown to peak in the transition period to secondary school. It was proposed that this is perhaps due to the changes and instability brought about to alliances and friendship groups as well as being the youngest within the school setting (Lopez-Castro et al., 2023). The awareness of this in teachers, in addition to the onset of puberty which brings about an enhanced importance of the peer group as well as social identities (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), may have contributed to the higher empathy and felt responsibility to intervene in secondary teachers. However, this presumes that those teachers would be mostly teaching the younger groups in the secondary school type. Further, the less frequent contact with individual teachers in secondary schools (van Aalst et al., 2024) may have potentially made teachers feel more responsible or empathic in order to compensate for this. However, we did not find corresponding enhanced levels of perceived seriousness or likelihood to actually intervene which would be expected under each of these conditions. Hence, those and other confounding factors possibly explaining those findings warrant further investigation. Future research should examine this in more depth.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There were some limitations to the current study that are worth noting. We did not include a control group, so we are unable to make comparisons with non-identity-based exclusion scenarios. Furthermore, our sample was self-selecting and so we were likely to have recruited participants who may have been particularly concerned about these forms of behaviour in their schools. It also meant that we were unable to ensure a representative sample of participants across the four nations of the UK. The majority of our participants were recruited from England and their responses may not have been representative of participants working in the other nations. We also used measures capturing teachers' perceptions and not more specific verifiable information at school level, in line with the international research this study derives from. Whilst this objective information could not be collected, given the design of the study and the recruitment strategy, in future studies, this point could be considered.

In addition, we could not confirm that missing responses excluded from the analyses were at random. We determined that there was a slight overrepresentation of qualified teachers as opposed to trainee teachers in the analysed compared to the excluded sample. However, we do not know the patterns of this for other socio-demographic variables or within non-responses to the survey, or how these patterns may have affected the results. Nonetheless, our study

revealed meaningful differences and associations in teacher responses. However, these results need to be interpreted keeping in mind the non-representative nature of our sample and unknown patterns of missing responses. Despite this, we recruited a large sample of teachers and trainee teachers in one of the first studies to look at perceptions of and responses to the different forms of identity-based peer exclusion among primary and secondary educators. Future studies may want to examine which teachers are more likely to respond, for example, which age group teachers are working with in more depth. Research has indicated that experiences of bullying demonstrate developmental differences which may be worth examining in this context (Monks & O'Toole, 2021). Research on prejudice-based bullying in Scotland has encountered various challenges in current years, but we hope that empirical studies will be facilitated and encouraged in the close future, addressing the existing barriers (Sapouna & De Amicis, *forthcoming*).

A further limitation of this type of study is that we are asking participants how they would respond to a hypothetical scenario. We cannot be certain that this is how they would respond to a real-life situation and all the nuances that this may involve. However, it provides us with information about how teaching staff intend to respond in certain situations along with their perceptions of these scenarios.

Implications for Practice

Taken together, these findings support the contention that teacher responses to identity-based bullying benefit from being viewed within a socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011) and taking into account wider contextual level social inequalities (Pratto et al., 2006). By incorporating multiple teacher- and school-level variables alongside educational level (primary/secondary) and different types of identity-based bullying within the same study, we provide a unique and holistic insight into the responses of teachers in the UK to this important issue. The ways in which teachers responded to the vignettes varied by individual level factors as well as factors at the school context level. These findings also have implications for initial teacher training as well as ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers to address and deal with bullying among their students. We know that students from minority or discriminated against groups are more at risk of being targeted by bullying and that this bullying can have serious negative impacts on the recipients which can be more severe than other forms of non-identity-based bullying (Fish et al., 2023; Hunter et al., 2010; Lawrence et al., 2024; Lessard et al., 2020; Sapouna et al., 2023). Teaching staff are vital in supporting young people who are being bullied in terms of being at the front line of prevention and intervention (Burger et al.,

2022); therefore, it is important that these forms of bullying are addressed within teacher training. The findings can also inform the development of programmes such the Equally Safe programme that was developed to support English schools to prevent and tackle identity-based bullying (Matasovska, 2023). Although we had few data from Scotland, this research can also feed into the current joint plan 2024–2027 developed by the Scottish Government and COSLA regarding inclusive behaviour in schools and can be integrated to the national anti-racism framework for initial teacher education (Mohammed, 2023).

In particular, our findings highlight some of the individual and school-level factors that can play a role in the ways in which teachers respond to identity-based bullying. What is apparent is that individual teacher identities appear to play a role in how they view and intervene in relation to identity-based bullying. We suggest that it is important that all school staff are supported and provided with training to identify identity-based bullying and to support their students when this occurs. It is vital that training should ensure that it reaches and connects with all teachers, given that some groups may be less likely to view these forms of bullying as seriously or feel less well equipped to deal with them. Further, training should ensure an awareness of the influence of the teachers' own background as well as their similarity to their students' background in terms of their perceptions and responses. Moreover, school-level factors which influence school culture or climate (e.g. SES, diversity) as well as the age group taught including school type (primary, secondary) should be considered in order to deliver nuanced and effective training as well as when developing school-wide policies. Lastly, the type of identity targeted and potential associated sensitivities to intervene need to be addressed, possibly by offering clear guidance on intervention strategies for these.

This approach is supported by the findings reported within the current study which highlighted the benefits of training and support from schools. Teachers based in schools where training and support was available viewed these forms of bullying as more serious, felt more empathy towards those who were targeted, and felt more able to intervene in these situations.

Identity-based bullying is a serious issue for students in school with the potential for severe negative consequences, and teachers are at the forefront in preventing, managing, and responding. The current study adds to our understanding of some of the factors related to how teachers view these forms of bullying and how confident they feel in addressing these behaviours among their students. By taking a socio-ecological approach (Swearer & Espelage, 2004, 2011), the current study highlights the importance of training for school staff in dealing with the complexity of these forms of bullying.

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Data Availability The data are available from the corresponding author, AG, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interest The authors declare no competing interests except LB who is a guest editor for the International Journal of Bullying Prevention.

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