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## **PUPIL'S STATUS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL AND BULLYING**

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### **Abstract**

Many relationships are established among pupils in the classroom. Bullying is a complex phenomenon that requires attention and active participation of all professional workers due to its negative impact. The most important factor in increasing the frequency of bullying is a pupil's status. The main goal of our research is to identify the relationship between the pupil's status and the frequency in the role of bullying. The sample represents 65 pupils from two primary schools. We have distributed questionnaire, which have had contain a sociometric test and the questionnaire School Bullying Scales. When processing the data, we used descriptive statistics: Kruskal-Wallis test, Eta correlation coefficient and Cronbach coefficient of reliability. We have found that the neglected, rejected and controversial pupils were more in the role of the bystanders and the victim. The findings have shown that there is a relationship between the pupil's status and the frequency in the role of the bystanders and the victim. Our findings cannot be generalized, but they give further research guidelines with the purpose of reducing bullying.

**Keywords:** role, connection and prevention of bullying.

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### **Introduction**

In life, everyone is involved in various social systems and environments in which they live and work. Individuals in a particular environment can influence us differently directly or indirectly with their behaviour, which was also established by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his bioecological theory of development. In it, Bronfenbrenner classified social environments in several concentric circles, where the environments in the inner concentric circles have a more direct impact on the individual.

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The social environments that have the greatest direct impact on the pupil in primary school are family, school, class, peer group.

In his bioecological theory of development, Bronfenbrenner explained that the values, laws and ideologies of the society in which the pupil lives are indirectly affecting him/her and his/her behavior. Various documents, for example The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Splošna deklaracija o človekovih pravicah, 1948), The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Vojnovič, Otavnik and Pleško, 2009), The White Paper on Education (Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji, 2011), have helped us set an important value: respecting and accepting diversity among individuals. Accepting and respecting diversity leads us to an inclusive society based on inclusion, seen by UNESCO (2005) as a process where diversity among people is not shown as a problem, but as an opportunity for learning.

By adhering to The Act on the Guidance of Children with Special Needs (Uradni list Republike Slovenije, 2011), pupils with special needs are included in the regular classes of primary schools; therefore, relations among normative pupils and pupils with special needs are established, and they may differ in quantity and quality - some pupils with special needs are accepted and others can be rejected. The work of professional staff in school aims to ensure the success of all pupils. The pupil will be able to achieve the most in a safe and stimulating environment; therefore it is important to create a stimulating (learning) environment and a positive climate in the classroom.

Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Visconti and Ettekal (2012) note that in the classroom there are three types of relationships: friendship, acceptance or rejection by the peer group, and bullying.

Friendship is a voluntary, intimate and dynamic relationship (Košir, 2011) based on trust and cooperation between two or more individuals (Košir, 2011; Peklaj and Pečjak, 2015; Gifford Smith and Brownell, 2003). Friendship is not always the same but it is changing and developing in parallel with social, emotional and cognitive development and the development of social cognition (Marjanovič Umek and Zupančič, 2009). At preschool age, a friend is someone who plays with you or has a nice toy, while to a pupil, a friend is a person who they can trust, understand and talk to him about their problems and emotions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

The group of pupils represents a group of children with similar characteristics, which experts call homophilia. Two processes, crucial to homophony, are socialization and selection (Ryan, 2001, in Košir, 2011). Peers have both a negative and a positive influence, which depends on the peer group. Peer influence is a reciprocal process as pupils influence their peers and are at the same time under their influence (Košir, 2013).

Asher, Singleton, Tinsley and Himmel (1979, in Peklaj and Pečjak, 2015) define social (non) acceptance as a relative status of a pupil in a peer group, which is determined by the degree of popularity or unpopularity of other members of the group.

Bullying is a relationship that, due to its negative impacts on the environment and the consequences on all participants, requires the attention and responsible behaviour of all adults, so we decided to discuss it in greater detail.

Sullivan (2011) argues that schools have a wrong belief that there is no bullying in their institution. Many schools are "afraid" of condemnation of the existence and occurrence of bullying by the narrower and wider society, since violence is still a taboo topic. The first step towards reducing the occurrence of bullying is recognizing that bullying exists in our schools. On the basis of this recognition, we can continue with our planned and structured approach to raising the public's awareness regarding bullying, prevention and implementation of measures to handle bullying.

Bullying in schools is not a new occurrence; it has been present for a long time. School-bullying research began in Scandinavia, where Heinemann (1972, in Salmivalli, 2010), supplemented by Olweus (1986, in 1995), defined bullying as repetitive aggressive actions of pupils or groups of pupils toward an individual or group over a longer period of time. Rigby (2002) adds that there is an imbalance in power between pupils who commit violence (the bully), and pupils who are victims of violence (the victim).

Bullying occurs on all people in the environment, which have become bystanders. Role of bystander is not a unified, but it differs by participation in bullying. Some bystanders become defenders of victims, while others bystanders support bullying and become a bully. About it notes Rigby (2002), Pečjak (2014), Seifert and Kohl (2011), Sutton and Smith (1999, in Pečjak, 2014).

Bystanders are the key for programs for prevention of bullying: KiVa programs (Salmivalli, Kärnä and Poskiparta, 2011), Olweus prevention program for the prevention of bullying (Olweus, 1995), Sullivan's preventive program for the prevention of bullying (Sullivan, 2011), The Network of Learning Schools: Strategies for the Prevention of Violence (Lešnik Mugnaioni, 2005).

Bullying not only has negative consequences on victims but also on all participants. Furthermore, the negative consequences of bullying are not just short-term but can affect the quality of life of an individual. Many studies (Bilić, Buljan Flander and Hrpka, 2012; Krkeljić; Gini and Pozzoli, 2013; Espelage, 2014; Geel, Vedder and Tanilon, 2014) have shown that pupils who were victims of bullying more often experienced headaches, stomach pain, feeling of inferiority, depression, anxiety,

learning difficulties, low self-esteem, drop in school success and motivation to attend school, and in worse case also suicide attempts and even suicides. What is more, pupils who are more often violent can feel the apparent power which can later on in adolescence and adulthood cause behaviour that leads to delinquency and criminal acts, according to an Australian expert Rigby (2007).

During the planning process of a preventive program for the prevention of bullying in schools, Klemenčič, Jerina, Karajić, Kuhar and Molan (2016) formulated four phases with several levels, whereby schools set up a school policy against bullying by integrating values and educational principles into the educational plan of the school, examining the bullying issue through various questionnaires, training all participants in bullying, designing and planning preventive activities.

The basis for preventing bullying is to work with everyone involved in bullying. Experts working on bullying should design work with the victim, the bullies and the bystanders. Of vital importance in raising awareness about the problem and the negative consequences of bullying is not only in working in schools, but it is also important for comprehensive preventive action in connection with bullying to work with pupils as well as with parents and consequently narrower and wider public, which is emphasized by various experts, e.g. Handbook "Violence among Children and Youth" (Savjetovalište "Luka Ritz", 2013), Pečjak (2014), Lešnik Mugnaloni, Koren, Logaj and Brejc (2009). Posnič and Košir (2016) underline the importance of actively addressing bullying by teachers, especially in the area of relational bullying. They also found that teachers are less likely to notice bullying at school than pupils, which is based on the fact that bullying more often occurs during the absence of the teacher.

Cvek and Pšunder (2013) emphasized the importance of holistic approach to bullying in their research, which found that setting a good example by employees in educational institutions and parents at home, along with their efforts to reducing and preventing bullying is contributing to reducing the phenomenon of bullying.

Bacallao and Smokowski (2010: 121) have studied the link between the weaker status of the pupil in class and the more frequent involvement in bullying. They have found that all sociometric groups have risk factors, protective factors and the connection with bullying, which will be shown in the following table.

Table 1: Link between the pupil's status in the classroom and bullying

	Risk factors	Protective factors	Connection with bullying
Popular	In order to protect their reputation, they use the reputation for negative purposes (exclusion other from the group, etc.).	Prosocial behaviour, respect for authority and rules, involvement in peer interaction. Higher level of development of social skills and knowledge.	Bystanders of bullying. Under peer pressure, they are involved in bullying.
Average	They feel the need to protect the relationships that they have. They can look for more popularity. There is fear of worsening the situation.	Peer support has little impact on social skills.	Bystanders of bullying. They do not intervene due to fear of being bullied.
Controversial	Disruptive, aggressive behaviour. There is a possibility that friends are also controversial.	They have managerial skills, they can have friends.	They can become bullies/victims. When they are victims, they search for the weaker individuals to bully. They can be involved in relational bullying.
Neglected	Loners, they prefer to play independently. They are rarely communicative. Weaker social skills.	They do not have to be lonely; they can have one or two reliable friends. They can be sensitive, creative and unusual.	High risk of becoming victims of bullying. Easy targets due to the less-anticipated resistance of the victim.

	Risk factors	Protective factors	Connection with bullying
Rejected	Lack of social skills, inappropriate behaviour, anxiety, hyperactivity, aggression.	There are two types of rejected individuals. The first are those who solve problems by retreating and hiding. The second ones have older friends who exhibit criminal or deviant behaviour.	Two types as well. The former are burdened with violence and humiliation: light targets and often victims. The latter lean towards being bullies.

Summarized by Bacallao and Smokowski (2010: 121)

### **Methodology**

The subject of our study is to determine the correlation between the pupil's status in the class and the phenomenon of bullying.

In the course of the study, we focused on determining the differences between pupils with different positions in the classroom and the sum of points in the role of the bystanders, the victim and the bully, and determining the correlation of the pupil's status in the classroom and the sum of points in roles in bullying.

The study involved 65 pupils from two selected primary schools in May 2017 and June 2018, whereby only pupils with assigned sociometric status were included in the research of differences and commonalities in the roles of the bystander, the victim and the bully.

Sociometric status is the most commonly used term and indicator of a position in a group. It is defined by two approaches, the first one being the place or the position of the pupil in the group determined by the members of the group with their positive and negative choices (Peklaj and Pečjak, 2015).

The second approach defines sociometric status as reputation, prestige and respect by classmates, which is related to the position or role of the pupil, which it has in the group (Pečjak and Košir, 2002).

The data were collected using a sociometric test, whereby we acquired the pupil's status on the basis of a two-dimensional sociometric classification, taking into account the social impact (visibility) and social preference (pleasure) using a positive and negative sociometric criterion, a questionnaire containing data on the class visited by the pupils, and

the status of a pupil with special needs, as well as the School Bullying Scales, Cheng et al. 2011, in Pečjak, 2014, 148-150.

The School Bullying Scales (Pečjak, 2014) is a self-evaluating instrument measuring four types of bullying in school. These are: verbal, physical, relational bullying and cyberbullying from the point of view of the bystander, the victim and the bully. Pupils respond to the items on a five-point scale (never, once or twice, twice or three times a month, once a week, several times a week) about the frequency of violence over a period of six months. We evaluate the rank by adding points in every section for each type of bullying, as shown in the table below (Pečjak, 2014, 87).

Table 2: Evaluation of data in the scale of bullying in school

	first part – the bystander	second part - the victim	third part - the bully
Verbal bullying	1, 3, 5, 8, 10	1, 3, 6, 7, 10	1, 4, 5, 9, 14
Physical bullying	2, 4, 9, 13, 16	4, 8, 13, 14	2, 3, 10, 11, 15
Relation bullying	6, 11, 15	5, 11	6, 8, 12
Cyberbullying	7, 12, 14	2, 9, 12	7, 13

Summarized by Pečjak (2014: 87).

Data obtained through sociometric testing were processed in Excel. Pupils were assigned their status in the classroom. The obtained data were entered into the statistical data processing program (SPSS 22.0).

In the data processing we used descriptive (frequencies and structural percentages) and inferential (Kruskal-Wallis H test for differences between pupils with different class status, the Eta correlation coefficient ( $\eta$ ) for determining the relationship between the nominal and the numerical variable, and the Cronbach  $\alpha$ -coefficient for checking the reliability of the measurement instrument) statistics.

In the study, using the Cronbach  $\alpha$ -coefficient for reliability verification, the reliability of the entire questionnaire was excellent ( $\alpha = 0.935$ ). Reliability was also checked by sets or roles. Reliability was also excellent in the role of the bystanders ( $\alpha = 0.896$ ) and the role of the victim ( $\alpha = 0.887$ ), while the reliability was moderate ( $\alpha = 0.783$ ) for the role of the bully.

Table 3 below shows the number of pupils with a particular status in class.

Table 3: Number (f) and structural percentages (f %) of pupils according to the pupil's status in the class

Pupil's status in class	f	f%
Average	15	23.1
Neglected	3	4.6
Controversial	1	1.5
Rejected	3	4.6
Popular	8	12.3
Together	30	46.2
Missing	35	53.8
Together	65	100

We find that the sample contained the highest percentage of average pupils (23.1%), followed by popular pupils (12.3%), while the lowest percentage are controversial pupils (1.5%). We also note that a large proportion of pupils (53.8%) do not have an assigned status in the class since we did not acquire enough consents and data in the classroom for sociometric testing.

### **Results and discussion**

In the study, we were interested in whether there are statistically significant differences between pupils in frequency in the role of a bystander, a victim and a bully, according to the pupil's status in the class. In a given group, pupils had a number of claims where pupils assessed their frequency in the last six months. We estimated the pupils' grades and got a certain amount of points. Higher values in a single set are more typical representatives of each role in relation to bullying.

We have found that there are statistically significant differences between pupils in terms of the pupil's status in the classroom regarding the role of the bystander and the victim. On the other hand, no differences occur in the role of the bully, as shown in the table below.

Table 4: The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test to check differences according to the pupil's status in the classroom

	The pupil's status	n	<u>R</u>	H	P
Bystander	Average	15	12,30	10.09	0.039
	Controversial	1	22,50		
	Popular	8	13,50		
	Neglected	3	25.83		
	Rejected	3	24.17		
Victim	Average	15	13,10	12,412	0.015
	Controversial	1	27,50		
	Popular	8	11.31		
	Neglected	3	22.83		
	Rejected	3	27.33		
Bully	Average	15	15.60	3,419	0,490
	Controversial	1	4.50		
	Popular	8	14.44		
	Neglected	3	22,00		
	Rejected	3	15,00		

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis reveal that, depending on the pupil's status in the class, there are statistically significant differences between the pupils in the role of the bystander and the victim.

We found that pupils with a disadvantaged status are more likely to witness bullying, as neglected and rejected pupils have a higher average of ranks than popular and average pupils. Regarding the pupil's status in the class, we also notice statistically significant differences also within the victim of bullying, as pupils with a worse status in the class had higher average ranks. The results show that pupils with a disadvantaged status in the class, ie. rejected, neglected and controversial pupils are more likely to witness and also experience bullying. Moreover, Bacallao and Smokowski (2010) found that pupils with a less favorable status in the class are more likely to be victims of bullying. Neglected pupils become victims of bullying due to a poorer status in the classroom, as they represent "easy targets" for bullying. Rejected pupils may become victims or violent of bullying.

Bacallao and Smokowski (2010) discovered that overlooked pupils are usually loners or have one or two loyal friends. They are characterized by lower social skills, and are therefore more often victims of bullying.

When it comes to prevention and reduction of bullying, professional workers can prepare various activities that can improve the pupil's status in the classroom for pupils with poor social skills, neglected and rejected pupils. These activities are, for example, social games, training of social

skills, activities in the area of experiential pedagogy. By planning and implementing activities, however, employees in educational institutions have a direct impact on pupils, which was also stressed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, Rhodes, 2013, in Naeem, 2013). Bioecological theory of pupil development states that professional workers employed in school have the power and influence on the formulation of school policy in the prevention and reduction of bullying in schools (Klemenčič, Jerina, Karajić, Kuhar and Molan, 2016).

By creating a program for preventing and reducing bullying in schools, bystanders of bullying (popular, overlooked, average, controversial and rejected pupils) are aware of the zero tolerance policy regarding bullying in schools and we encourage them to condemn bullying and to talk about bullying without fear or peer pressure. The average pupils are afraid to talk about bullying, fearing the same thing may happen to them, which Bacallao and Smokowski (2010) also pointed out.

We were also interested to find out whether there is a connection between the pupil's status and the sum of points in the role of a bystander, a victim, and a bully.

Table 5: Coefficient of coherence of Eta in the sum of points in the role of a bystander, victim and a bully in the event of bullying

	The sum of points of the bystander in the event of bullying
Eta	0.628
	The sum of points of the victim in the event of bullying
Eta	0.775
	The sum of points of the bully in the event of bullying
Eta	0.331

The Eta correlation coefficient reveals that between the pupil's status and the total sum of the points of the bystander, there is a strong connection ( $\eta = 0.628$ ). This tells us that pupils with a worse status in the class had higher average ranks, and, consequently, they were more often in the role of bystander in the event bullying. We also found a strong connection ( $\eta = 0.705$ ) regarding the sum of the points in the victim's category among the pupils according to the status of the pupil in the class. Bacallao and Smokowski (2010) also find that neglected and rejected pupils more often appear in the role of the victim than popular

pupils. Concerning controversial pupils, they stand behind the thesis that these pupils can occupy the role of the victim and the role of the bully at the same time. When pupils appear in the role of the victim, they seek out weaker pupils and carry out bullying. In the role of the bully, we have found that there is a weak connection between the pupil's status and the sum of points ( $\eta = 0.331$ ), which means that it is not necessary that pupils with a worse status in the class have higher sums of points in the role of a bully.

## **Conclusion**

Bullying in schools is a big issue of modern education because schools do not want or do not dare acknowledge that bullying exists in their institution. It is in the interest of each school that the public sees it as a place where bullying does not exist because soon as the existence of bullying is acknowledged, the school may be labeled as a place of violence, which shows the school in a bad light.

Based on our research, we find that bullying is a problem, so it is necessary to treat bullying with all seriousness. Working with pupils and parents is not enough; the public has to be included as well. The public and the media often label schools as "violent schools", "schools where violence occurs", where "bullying has erupted again". But as society as a whole, we do not realize that this problem may lead to extreme cases of bullying. We estimate that the media and ourselves are putting the "pressure" on primary schools to be safe and bullying-free.

At the end of the day, we wonder whether it is more important what image a school projects, or what the relationships between pupils, teachers and parents are. We do not have the answer to this question, but we can be certain that if we wish to reduce bullying, we, as a society, need to be aware that bullying in schools exists.

The topics discussed, such as the status of the pupil in the classroom and bullying, are two important components in the school sphere. As part of the inclusive paradigm which becomes the imperative of modern education, we have the desire and the vision that everyone should be included in the class. Not only involved, but accepted. This can only happen if we set a good example. Adults who are close to pupils are role models to pupils. With this way of thinking, we will strive to achieve respect of diversity among pupils and create activities that will improve the situation of the pupil and reduce bullying.

The findings and results of the research will not be generalized to the whole school sphere, but they undoubtedly warn us about the possible connection of the disadvantaged pupil with a greater presence in the role of bullying. In further research, a pattern of pupils would be used to identify the links in order to use the processed data to use activities to

improve the pupil's status in the classroom for the purpose of preventing and reducing bullying.

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