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# **Bullies, victims and control group students: A comparison of different types of prosocial behaviour in peer and teacher-pupil relations**

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## **Introduction**

Schools regularly find themselves having to deal with challenging antisocial behaviour among children and adolescents and they are asking to help tackle bullying in schools. These developments in social context present a major potential challenge to the school curriculum. In the current context of concern about children's citizenship education there is, therefore, a need to identify ways to provide educational experiences which will foster pupils' interpersonal skills and to inhibit their antisocial behaviour – including school bullying. Further progress in tackling school bullying is likely to depend on greater insight into the factors associated with bullying and victimization.

There is a concern about the quality of social experience provided for pupils within the schools as a part of the curriculum. Teachers may feel that they not only have to cope with the effects of inadequate socialisation but also that they must compensate for their pupils' lack of relevant social experience in the curricular activities they provide. This issue is relevant because purposeful acquisition of social skills promotes the development of successful citizenship. For example, Andersone [2004] found that university students consider particular social skills important for the development of citizenship: mutual trust, getting to know one another, sharing a work place and listening skills.

Social skills of every member of the society are important for accentuation and promoting effective socialization. Social skills are acquired and developed in the social network, which at school level consists of pupils and adults. The acquisition of social skills is developmentally very meaningful for adolescents when their self-identity and autonomy are crucial as developmental tasks during this period.

Certain behavioural characteristics that can be considered as poor social skills have been found to put children/adolescents at increased risk of being victimized at school. Social skills have been defined as, 'The specific behaviours that enable a person to be judged as socially competent by others on a particular social task' [McFall, 1982, p 12]. Previous studies have focused on examining a broad range of behaviours that are thought to reflect a social skills deficit in victims: non-assertive behaviour [Perry, Willard and Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge and Coil, 1993], they cry easily [Fox and Boulton, 2005; Perry, Willard and Perry, 1990], they display anxious vulnerability [Fox and Boulton, 2005; Troy and Sroufe, 1987], they have low levels of self-esteem [Rigby and Slee, 1993], few friends and loneliness [Eslea, et al., 2003], whereby it was shown [Storch, Brassard and Masia-Warner, 2003] that prosocial behaviours from peers moderated the effects of victimization of children on loneliness. Thus, a number of prior studies have

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found that victims of school bullying tend to exhibit poor social skills, though few of these have examined this issue from multiple perspectives, and there has been a focus on a restricted range of social skills. Indeed, very few previous studies have focused on examining deficit of prosocial behaviours of participants of school bullying.

Jackson and Tisak [2001] raised a question that it is important to consider the characteristics of participants and the prosocial context examining children's thinking about different types of prosocial behaviours. Pulkkinen [1996] found negative correlations between prosocial characteristics of adolescents and their bullying type behaviour. Chen et al. [2002] research results indicated that prosocial orientation, which includes helping, cooperating, sharing, caring and taking responsibility for another in childhood, made a contribution to the prediction of subjects' later educational achievement.

Prosocial behaviours are types of interaction which favour and foster social relationships. A consensual definition would include those behaviours which show respect, interest and concern for others [Warden and Christie, 1999]. Prosocial behaviour consists of such behaviour as caring about others, cooperation, friendliness, helpfulness, responsibility, trustworthiness, generosity, and lack of self-centeredness [Bruno, 1992].

Prosocial behaviour is viewed as an essential activity for the effective functioning of social groups and the well-being of society in general [Rushton, 1980]. Past studies of prosocial behaviour have clearly demonstrated the important role positive behaviours play in children's social development [e. g. Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989].

Several behavioural characteristics that can be considered of poor prosocial skills have been found to put children at increased risk of being associated with victimization and bullying. Warden and Mackinnon [2003] found that prosocial children showed greater empathic awareness than either bullies or victims, prosocial children and victims responded more constructively than bullies to socially awkward situations, and bullies were less aware than prosocial children of the possible negative consequences of their solution strategies. Johnson et al. [2002] found that boys with poor prosocial skills, emotional problems and general difficulties with social interaction, expression of emotions and hyperactivity were at greatest risk of being bullied. Xu et al. [2003] findings showed that bully/victims were disliked by peers, had fewer dyadic friends and lower prosocial ratings than nonvictimized aggressors or the normative children. Bardry and Farrington [2000] analyzed the personal characteristics of bullies and delinquents and found that bullies, delinquents and bully/delinquents differed significantly from non-bullies/non-delinquents in being less prosocial. Also, it was shown that there is a deficit in social skills of bullies: deficit in the social informational processes [Randall, 1997] and a lack of empathy [Olweus, 1993].

Previous results indicate that peer-directed prosocial behaviours are qualitatively different than those which are characteristic of kindness toward adults: types of prosocial behaviours directed toward peers are more supportive of relationship building and the prosocial behaviours that adults have the most opportunity to observe may have more to do with cooperation and obedience [Greener and Crick, 1999].

If our intention is to foster pupils' prosocial behaviour and to inhibit their bullying behaviour, then we must begin by giving a deeper insight into positive (prosocial) characteristics of different participants of bullying behaviour in social networks, consisting of the main agents of socialisation of pupils in schools: peers and teachers.

The purpose of the study was to compare the frequencies of seven different prosocial behaviours (helping, showing empathy, cooperating, inclusion, support and trusting) among four groups of subjects: bullies, victims, bully/victim and controls in two levels of relationships in a school setting: pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher.

It was hypothesized that control group pupils show empathy more frequently among peer relations than victims and bullies.

## Method

### *Selection of subjects*

The selection of schools was to obtain a fairly representative sample - schools were selected from all (16) separate districts from Estonia, representing one randomly selected school from each district, whereby the ratio of different types of schools (gymnasium versus primary school: 6 versus 4) among the sample of schools corresponds to the whole-country school sample.

Bullies and victims from the representative sample of schools were selected on the basis of peer nomination - Peer Nomination Inventory [Perry, Kusel and Perry, 1988] was employed to select subjects among 5-7 grade students. From a sample of 1305 school children aged 10-16 years, four groups were identified: bullies ( $N=90$ ), victims ( $N=99$ ), bully/victims ( $N=13$ ), and controls ( $N=1103$ ) (Table 1).

**Table 1. Number and percentage of bullies, victims and bully/victims among the whole sample of subjects**

Subjects	Number of subjects	Percentage of subjects
Whole sample	1305	100.00
Bullies	90	6.90
Victims	99	7.59
Bully/victims	13	1.00
Subjects connected with bullying behaviour	202	15.48
Subjects not connected with bullying behaviour	1103	84.52

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire was designed to measure the frequency of seven different types of prosocial behaviour (helping, inclusion, showing empathy, cooperating, sharing, support,

showing trustworthiness) exhibited by the four groups of children in peer and teacher-student relations by self-report measure. Participants answered each item describing prosocial behaviour using one of four response alternatives, with scores ranging from 0 to 3: never = 0; seldom = 1; often = 2; very often = 3.

## Results

The paper compares the levels of frequency of different types of prosocial behaviour exhibited by the four groups of children (bullies, victims, bully/victims and controls) in two types of relations in school setting: pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher.

Overall, research results indicated that cooperation, helping and inclusion were the most frequent types of prosocial behaviour of pupils in peer relations and children-to-teacher relations. Relatively infrequent types of prosocial behaviour were support and sharing in pupil-pupil relations, and additionally empathy in teacher-pupil relations (Table 2).

**Table 2. Frequency of different types of prosocial behaviour of bullies, victims, bully/victims and control group pupil in pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relations**

Type of prosocial behaviour	Pupil-pupil relations				Pupil-teacher relations			
	Bullies	Vic-tims	Bully/victims	Cont-rols	Bullies	Vic-tims	Bully/victims	Con-t-rols
Helping	1.79	1.58	1.54	1.88	1.50	1.61	1.46	1.63
Showing empathy	1.43	1.44	1.67	1.67	1.20	1.33	1.31	1.18
Sharing	1.60	1.36	1.15	1.65	1.40	1.29	1.62	1.40
Cooperating	1.85	1.58	1.46	2.02	1.49	1.41	1.38	1.49
Inclusion	1.70	1.60	1.62	1.87	1.50	1.56	1.31	1.57
Support	1.57	1.47	1.38	1.76	1.30	1.39	1.08	1.28
Showing trustworthiness	1.82	1.59	1.31	1.91	1.39	1.61	1.08	1.50

Using *t*-test, several differences between the four study groups were significant, comparing different types of prosocial behaviour in peer relations (Table 3). The scores for helping and cooperation for the control group pupils were significantly higher than that for the bullies, victims and bully/victims, whereby scores of victims were significantly lower than that for bullies. The same tendency revealed connections with sharing and trusting behaviour among the four study groups: control group members had higher scores compared with participants of bullying behaviour (bullies, victims, bully/victims), whereby victims had lower scores compared with scores of bullies and bully/victims.

Research results also indicated that control group subjects had showed in peer relations more frequently (statistically significant differences) support, empathy and inclusion compared with bullies and victims.

This finding provided clear support for the hypothesis that control group pupils show empathy more frequently among peer relations than victims and bullies.

**Table 3. T-values of seven types of prosocial behaviours between different subject's groups in pupil-pupil relationships**

Type of prosocial behaviour	Bullies versus victims	Bullies versus bully/victims	Bullies versus controls	Victims versus bully/victims	Victims versus controls	Bully/victims versus controls
Helping	1.97*	1.08	1.90*	0.34	3.17**	1.87*
Showing empathy	0.07	0.78	2.38*	0.75	2.50*	0.02
Sharing	2.13*	1.87*	0.51	0.88	3.77**	2.23*
Cooperating	2.37*	1.52	1.85*	0.47	5.46**	2.28*
Inclusion	0.75	0.25	1.92*	0.18	3.28**	1.55
Support	0.84	0.73	2.03*	0.33	3.25**	1.55
Showing trustworthiness	1.78*	1.83*	0.95	1.06	2.75*	3.58*

\* -  $p < 0,05$ \*\* -  $p < 0,01$ 

Consequently, the four types of prosocial behaviour clearly separated into two groups: pupils who were not involved in school bullying behaviour used cooperation, helping, sharing and trusting behaviours in peer relations more frequently compared with pupils who were involved in school bullying behaviour (bullies, victims, bully/victims), whereby the poorest prosocial skills in this area (cooperation, helping, sharing, trusting) were characteristics of the victims. In addition, it was found that nonparticipants of school bullying showed empathy, support and inclusion in peer relations more frequently compared with bullies and victims.

Table 4 shows the *t*-values between the four groups of subjects in terms of frequency scores among seven different types of prosocial behaviour in teacher-pupil relations. Only two of 42 were statistically significant – bully/victims showed trustworthiness less frequently in pupil-teacher relations compared with controls and victims.

Consequently, bully/victims had more prosocial skills problems in relations with teachers in the area of trustworthiness compared with controls and victims.

## Discussion

One of the central concerns in citizenship education is the importance of taking positive steps to foster children's and adolescents' prosocial behaviour. This approach involves a change of

**Table 4. T-values of seven types of prosocial behaviours between different subject's groups in pupil-teacher relationships**

Type of prosocial behaviour	Bullies versus victims	Bullies versus bully/victims	Bullies versus controls	Victims versus bully/victims	Victims versus controls	Bully/victims versus controls
Helping	0,87	0,13	1,44	0,48	0,27	0,58
Showing empathy	0,95	0,40	0,24	0,10	1,54	0,53
Sharing	0,82	0,91	0,06	1,02	1,40	1,02
Cooperating	0,62	0,47	0,03	0,11	0,81	0,49
Inclusion	0,49	0,50	0,77	1,01	0,10	1,11
Support	0,71	0,72	0,19	1,04	1,13	0,69
Showing trustworthiness	1,45	1,22	1,04	2,08*	0,95	1,83*

\* -  $p < 0,05$

emphasis from more reactive educational strategies which focus upon the inhibition of antisocial behaviours, towards proactive support for prosocial behaviours.

Furthermore, while the prominence given to bullying in schools has understandably focused attention and efforts on the inhibition of unacceptable/antisocial behaviour, there needs to be a corresponding awareness and encouragement of acceptable/prosocial behaviours. The aim must be to develop children's and adolescents' interpersonal skills by fostering positive behaviours and social relationships. Such a view is being supported by the introduction of guidance for schools in the area of personal and social development of citizenship education.

With the focus of most published research in this area [Sharap and Smith, 1994; Sullivan, Cleary and Sullivan, 2004] largely falling on the bullying and victimization behaviour, perhaps the educational significance of prosocial behaviour has been overlooked. The present investigation aims to explore the positive aspects of pupils' social competence/prosocial skills, and ultimately to contribute to the development of effective educational strategies to foster them.

The capacity to interact successfully with others at schools is an important developmental task for all pupils. Using analysis of the self-ratings, four of the prosocial skills types were found to discriminate between participants of school bullying and non-participants of bullying: cooperation, helping, sharing and trusting, being in prevalence among the latter sample. It is important to notice that the same four prosocial items of self-report ratings indicated also significantly more pronounced prosocial skills problems among peers for victims compared with bullies and bully/victims.

The finding that victims had the poorest prosocial skills in the area of cooperation, helping, sharing and trusting among peers has important implications for interventions to support victims of school bullying, highlighting a core of prosocial skills problems associated with peer victimization. Also Smorti and Ciucci's [2000] findings are parallel with our results, showing that bullies were more similar to the control group than victims in the area of socio-cognitive skills.

What is also poorly developed in bullies' and victims' social competence is the ability to empathise, to support peers, and to apply a prosocial behaviour in the area of befriending, making peers welcome and preventing isolation among peers (inclusion).

The findings have important implications for interventions to help children who are at risk of being bullied by peers or are bullies. By helping children overcome such social skills deficits, we can help them reduce their risk of being connected with bullying behaviour.

On the one side, previous research suggests that positive peer relationships may be associated with a reduction in the rates of peer victimization and may even serve a protective function against future negative outcomes [Hodges et al., 1999; Hodges, Malone and Perry, 1997; Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996]. Some investigations of peer victimization have suggested that receipt of peer prosocial behaviours is positively associated with children's social adjustment [Crick, 1996; Crick and Bigbee, 1998]. While these studies provide evidence regarding the potentially protective effects of peer prosocial behaviour in general terms, our focus was on the receipt of different types of prosocial behaviours from peers: results suggested that any attempt to improve victims' prosocial skills in the area of cooperative, helping, sharing and trusting among peer may have a positive effect on pupils' risk for peer victimization, and any support to emphasize mutual support, inclusion and showing of empathy in peer relationships may be associated with reduction in rates of bullying behaviour among pupils.

On the other side, teacher-student relationships have been found to be an important factor in affecting the prosocial behaviour of students at different grades: Birch and Ladd [1998] found that good teacher-child relationships were associated with increasing the prosocial behaviour of kindergartners. Wentzel [1998] found that in adolescence, teachers' support was a positive predictor of the social responsibility of adolescents. Also, results indicated that peers exert greater influence on adolescents' antisocial behaviour than on prosocial behaviour [Ary et al., 1999; Ma et al., 1996; Warr, 1993], but the greater the teacher influence, the less frequency of delinquent behaviour of adolescents [Ma et al., 2002]. Our findings are in line with previous findings, indicating that teachers' influence is significant in building trusting relationships with adolescents to help those who are at risk of being bullied by peers or are bullies.

Overall, researches into pupils' prosocial behaviour derive from a practical concern with education and behavioural management in the classroom. The implication of these findings is important for the design of citizenship education in schools. In general it is argued that schools should place more emphasis on the development of prosocial behaviour of the pupils. Giving a higher priority of personal and social education of students within the school curriculum we can implement anti-bullying policies in schools. Nevertheless, bullying in schools remains a problem and we propose that equipping pupils with the prosocial skills to resist it is a worthy endeavour.

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