



‘What we give to others, come back to us’. The role of peer leadership in creating a positive school climate and bullying prevention¹

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Abstract:

In this article, the authors discuss the nature of peer-based prevention programs. The analyzes are conducted in the context of school bullying prevention and the associated need to build a friendly and safe school environment. Attention was paid to shaping a positive peer culture by involving young people in various types of prosocial activities. Peer leadership programs are a special kind of activity where the driving force is youth. Implementation of a peer program into school life enables the full potential of young people to be activated. Such programs mobilize young people

to make positive changes in their social surroundings, to help themselves and others through constructive cooperation. Taking into account that these programs are carried out within the school environment, the condition of the effectiveness is the attitude of school toward such activities. It is important to foster positive peer relationships, to encourage students to participate and create the right conditions for change.

1. Introduction

The inspiration for this article was the latest own research on school bullying phenomenon conducted among adolescents. In this study, focus group interviews with students were conducted during which various aspects of bullying phenomenon were analyzed. One of the topics was the possible behaviors of bullying bystanders and their circumstances. In one group of girls, the passivity of bystander was justified by fear of own safety. The next question was about the choice – with whom the student taking part in the interview would prefer to swap places – with the bully, the bullied, or one of the bystanders. The students were also asked to justify their choices. All the girls in this group said they would prefer to swap places with bystander of bullying and they would try to help the victim in some ways (so they will be an ‘upstander’). Asked if they would not be afraid of their safety, because they had previously recognized it as an important indicator of lack of defense, one girl said that she would not be afraid to help a student who is being bullied, she would not be afraid to stand in his defense, because ‘what we give to others, come back to us’. This attitude and explanation was very unusual among sample of adolescents who participate in this research and it’s these words that have become the inspiration for preparing this article and considering the role of positive peer leadership in creating a healthy school climate and bullying prevention.

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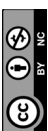
It should be noted that the motivation for defending and prosocial behavior in general can be varied. Referring to Reykowski's (1979) regulatory theory of personality, it can be stated that prosocial behavior can be associated with three types of regulation. An egocentric regulation of the defensive character will involve helping to improve a bad mood or maintain a good mood. The egocentric regulation of assertive character will be a source of prosocial behavior for reward or confirmation of one's own competence. On the other hand, egocentric regulation of the standard character implies compliance with the norm of social responsibility and reciprocity and facilitates social modeling. The cited statement of girl may be interpreted as expectation of reciprocity, which mean expectation that by helping others, the likelihood of getting help in need is increased. Reciprocity can be both positive and negative. Positive features include to initiate and stabilize social relationships and to foster a tendency towards reciprocal altruism. It can be considered that in this sense and in such a context the exchange is of a positive nature, inter alia, it can be an expression of building a social support. In terms of functional social support, the emphasis is on social interactions that are taken by one or both participants in a difficult, stressful or critical situation in which communication (one-sided interaction) or exchange action (bilateral interaction) occurs. The effectiveness of this social exchange is the adequacy of the type and magnitude of the support given to the person, and the effectiveness of which is determined by the attainment of the objectives of supporting interventions such as: general support, reduction of stress, crisis management by accompaniment, sense of belonging, security and hope to solve the problem and overcome the difficulties (Włodarczyk, 2016).

Furthermore, in the context of prosocial activities and building social support in school environment, it would be also important to stimulate something like a prosocial chain reaction. Positive psychology suggest the importance of developing, within the context of schools, the awareness of the value of prosocial attitudes and behavior and a safe atmosphere in which these skills can be cultivated (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Caprara et al., 2014; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Schools are important socializing venues that can play significant roles in promoting prosocial behavior, especially by building a school community. The community is therefore a bond of categorial interpersonal relationships that bind people, so they can develop their personality. In schools that seek to be community-based, students have the opportunity to become aware of the meaning of belonging, to cooperate and to share common efforts to accomplish school tasks (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2016). It stimulates individual and social forces, stimulates motivation, satisfies various needs and strengthens social integration. In addition, such activities may be a good counterbalance to antisocial behavior, such as bullying (Pyżalski, 2017; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2016, 2017). Results of research conducted by Caprara and colleagues (2014) which was aimed at evaluating the effects of a pilot school-based intervention called CEPIDEA designed to promote prosocial behavior in early adolescence, showed that the increase of helping behavior mediated the decline of verbal aggression in adolescents who had attended the intervention. Findings also suggest that promoting prosocial behavior may serve to counteract aggressive conduct and enhance academic achievement during adolescence. For these reasons, it is worthwhile to devote some attention to these issues.

2. School bullying prevention

Bullying is a complex social and educational problem, and it has received a great deal of attention by both, educationalist and scientists. First, because of the prevalence of this phenomenon in schools around the world, second, because of its negative effects, both short- and long-term for victims, bullies but also various consequences for the whole school community (see i.e. Samara et al., 2017). Despite some debate over the definition, most researchers agree that, bullying is marked by differences in power, and manifests in deliberate and repetitive acts of harassment (Olweus, 1993; Farrington, 1993; see also: Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017). Bullying is a complex social process that includes all members of the school community. Salmivalli et al. (1996) used a peer-nomination procedure to identify four participant roles that children may have in the bullying process, in addition to being bullies or victims: assistants of bullies, reinforcers of bullies, outsiders, and defenders of the victim. This way the bullying is placed in a group context.

During over the four decades of research on bullying, several methods and prevention programs have been developed. Many intervention, education and prevention programs have been formulated to reduce or limit the intensity of aggressive and violent behaviors in the school. However, it turns out, that there is no



and one perfect program, one effective method that will reduce school violence. The most valuable and most effective programs are multimodal. Fox and colleagues (2012) stated that programs that are more intensive and of longer duration (for both students and teachers) are more effective, as are programs containing more components.

Ttofi and Farrington (2011) presented a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in schools. A total of 622 reports concerned with bullying prevention were found, but as a result, 44 programs were analyzed in which it was possible to calculate the effect size for bullying or victimization. The meta-analysis of these 44 evaluations showed that, overall, school-based anti-bullying programs are effective: on average, bullying decreased by 20–23% and victimization decreased by 17–20%. Gaffney and the mentioned authors, Ttofi and Farrington (2019) developed further comprehensive and extensive systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of bullying prevention programs which updates earlier research. Systematic searches of online databases were conducted for primary studies published from 2009 to December 2016. Following systematic screening of over 20000 search results, a total of 100 evaluations (with 103 independent effect sizes) were eligible for inclusion. The results suggest that anti-bullying programs effectively reduce school-bullying perpetration by approximately 19 – 20% and reduce school-bullying victimization by approximately 15 – 16%. In both meta-analysis program elements and intervention components that were associated with a decrease in bullying and victimization were also identified. More intensive programs were more effective, as were programs including such activities as parent meetings, firm disciplinary methods, and improved playground supervision. A somewhat surprising result of Ttofi and Farrington (2011) meta-analysis was that work with peers (identified as peer mediation, peer mentoring, engagement of bystanders in bullying situations) was associated with an increase in victimization. However, the researchers stated that these elements are most highly correlated with effectiveness but this does not prove that they cause effectiveness. It may be necessary to examine and analyze how these elements were linked to other elements of the prevention programs and / or how they were implemented. Gaffney, Ttofi and Farrington (2019) also stated that intervention components are multi-faceted, and thus, in future analysis coding intervention components in more detail should be done.

On the other hand, analysis synthesized bullying prevention programs' effectiveness at increasing bystander intervention in bullying situations, emphasize the importance of elements related to the peer group. Results of meta-analysis conducted by Polanin, Espelage and Pigott (2012) suggest that researchers and school administrators should consider implementing programs that focus on bystander intervention behavior supplementary to bullying prevention programs. This means supporting efforts aimed at raising awareness about the participant roles, to encourage active and prosocial behavior. Also, Lee, Kim and Kim (2013) based on the meta-analysis of 13 studies stated that effective school-based anti-bullying programs should include training in emotional control, peer counseling, and the establishment of a school policy on bullying.

Irrespective of minor discrepancies, it is certain that comprehensive interventions and programs, carried out with the full participation and strong support of the whole school community, show better results. This type of conclusion leads to reflection on the issue of school climate.

3. Positive school climate as a protective factor

School climate analyzes take into account the very wide spectrum of impacts attributed to it. The school climate includes many variables (dimensions) that remain in complex interactions and in many ways, involve school behavior (Wang & Degol, 2015; Przewłocka, 2015; Ostaszewski, 2012; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2014). In recent years, the school climate has become the focus of researchers in the prevention of problem behaviors of youth, including those focused on the use of peer violence in school. Positive school climate is associated with less severe risk behaviors of adolescents. Students who have positive relationships with teachers, more rarely manifest problem behavior. Also, friendly relationships, experience of acceptance and recognition from colleagues play an important protective role (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2015; 2013; Ostaszewski, 2012; Kulesza, 2011; Preble & Gordon, 2011).

School climate studies are conducted not only to find out what the school climate is, but also to make changes to a better and more productive school. Researchers seek to know certain patterns so that in later stages it should allow them to propose and implement social change. So far, studies have shown that in the



combined dimensions of school climate, there are some opportunities for prevention and reduction of school bullying (see i.e.: Orpinas, Horne & Staniszewski, 2003). Modifying or improving school climate is associated with a reduction of peer violence. Researchers also point to the relationship of good school climate with positive attitudes of students towards school and pro-social activities in school, self-satisfaction and self-esteem (Kulesza, 2011; 2007; Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

Cohen and colleagues (2015) suggest that a continuous process of school climate improvement needs to be an integral and organizing anchor for effective bully prevention and school improvement efforts. They outline a series of comprehensive, research-based guidelines that subsume targeted efforts within more comprehensive approaches that promote positive, sustained school climates. The cited authors have outlined five overlapping processes that represent a comprehensive and effective strategy that prevents bullying behaviors. These strategies include: (1) educational leadership, (2) assessment, (3) engaging the whole school community, (4) policies, rules and supports and (5) systemic, instructional and relational/management overlapping aspects of practice. They suggest that such approach not only prevents bully-victim-bystander behavior but also promotes safe, supportive, responsible, engaging, flourishing and democratically informed school communities.

Taking into account the information provided above, school-based preventive actions should take into account school climate change, which fosters the positive development of youth. It provides the opportunity to create more learner-friendly (and teacher-friendly) learning environments but also less vulnerable to antisocial behavior. One of the elements that in this context should be considered and implemented is peer leadership.

3. Why peer leadership?

Leadership research has a long history, and their origins go back to antiquity. Up today, there is considerable debate about the nature and meaning of leadership, and about what skills and attributes are needed in today's, and future, leaders. The term 'leadership' is generally the name referring to the consideration the conduct of an individual in a particular group or treatment of an individual by the group as a role model. In both cases, an individual is called a leader (Boroch & Chmielecka, 2017, p. 37). However, forecasting effective leadership is complex and requires more than just the identification of personality traits or the preferred behavior of the leader. Evidence shows that the nature of leadership – including the skills and qualities required for effective leadership – is changing in response to changes in the social world.

There are many different theories and concepts of leadership. In the context of the discussion undertaken in this article, the concept of servant leadership can be recalled. First and foremost, it is part of the humanist line. It emphasizes that leadership does not mean that others do something because of external circumstances, but it means rather to make others want to do so. The servant leader emphasizes the importance of acting for the benefit of others, enhancing the service of others, promoting the sense of community and participation in decision-making. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the 'top of the pyramid', servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. However, this does not mean, that the servant leader is to be a martyr. This type of leader is committed to cultivating own and other people development as well as community's development. Principles, beliefs and values play a key role here. Authenticity and responsibility are the basis of actions. Rules and values are not just slogans, but also a way of life. In turn, authenticity and credibility generate trust (Bezzina & Madalińska-Michalak, 2014). This state of affairs seems to be ideal for building a social group's potential and promoting pro-social activities. However, it is nowhere to be said that such leaders can only be adults.

In line with the development, young people are becoming more and more active. In the early stages of life, the direction is determined by the parents, but at the age of adolescence, the youth themselves choose and designate their areas of activity. Teachers and practitioners working with classrooms may find that in many youth groups there are bad standards and a climate of tolerance for aggressive behavior. These norms are not accepted by everyone, but most are subjected to them or silent, fearing repression in case of open opposition to the group. The normative consequences of normalization are usually imposed by a small group of young people (sometimes even by one person), so-called negative leader. Negative leaders use different ways of enforcing compliance with imposed norms. They can use their physical strength and threaten to use it



against those who try to break from the established order. However, as Pepler (2006) stated, there are opportunities to transform the negative leadership shown through bullying to positive leadership within the home, school, and community context.

In the current model of youth problem behaviors prevention, it is postulated that young people should be included as not only recipients but also as creators and implementers of these programs (Michel, 2014). The argument for the inclusion of youth in this type of activity is their positive impact on their peers and their adaptation in difficult situations. Peer group can become an area for realization of many positive qualities, abilities and potentials. Furthermore, the activity of a young people gives the opportunity to gain important insights and skills. The adolescence period is an unquestionable opportunity to implement for future social roles or to challenge in different roles. The experience gained in this way constitutes a young person's ability to build their own strategy for being in society, both in adolescence and in adulthood. As a result, youth activity affects the future of society.

Peer-based programs assume that peers have a strong influence on adolescent behavior and therefore, the use of peer interaction can be extremely effective in counteracting youth problem behaviors. They are most often targeted towards the following objectives: (1) creating opportunities to participate in pro-social activities in their community, enabling adolescents to make decisions about their lives and accept responsibility for themselves and their community; (2) developing young people's skills and sense of competence in terms of intrapsychic, interpersonal and social functioning and (3) learning to deal with negative peer pressure (Gaś, 1993). Peer-to-peer programs encourage young people to make positive changes and help themselves and others through constructive co-operation. In the guide produced by Partners Against Hate was identified seven components of successful peer programs: (1) clearly goals and objectives, (2) a context of area of focus, (3) broad support from the school community, (4) consistent, committed adult leadership, (5) an integrated educational process, (6) student-led program and activities and (7) opportunities for reflection and ongoing evaluation of efforts.

Students may be engaged in elected or appointed leadership roles or as individual mentors, group facilitators, or instructors, and as instruments of support, resource or referral. Students as peer leaders may be useful in contexts that range from individual interaction, such as a mentoring relationships or one-on-one peer advising, to leadership in a group, organizational or community setting (Cuseo, 2010; see also: Keup, 2016). In implementation peer leadership program, it is important to choose young people as leaders and to identify their place and role in the program (Gaś, 1992). Three ways for participation in the program are the most commonly used. The first one emphasizes that anyone who wants to help peers should be included in the program and properly prepared. The second option is that the school staff selects students who, in their opinion, have leadership tendencies, appropriate maturity and responsibility, and will willingly and reliably cooperate with school personnel. The third possibility is the combination of the two discussed above. All ways to recruit young people are valuable and can be used. Irrespective of which one will be used, the effectiveness of the program will depend on the diversity and representativeness of the selected group of students for a particular school population. If other students see peer leaders as a special school elite, they will rather not make direct contact to seek help. Another key issue in implementing peer leadership program is the proper preparation of teenagers to play the roles of peer leaders. Activities such as active listening, comprehension of verbal and nonverbal messages, classification of the value system, problem solving, decision-making and program organization, and directing colleagues to outside professionals are basis for such programs. Peer leadership programs cannot function without adult support. Its action must be directed by the school coordinator (Gaś, 1995; Ziarek, 2003).

The advantages of peer programs are multi-faceted. Michel (2014) refers to various experiences in this area and studies and states that peer-based programs are helpful in prevention. They rely on the energy and enthusiasm of the young people who are genuinely interested in solving problems, providing opportunities for engaging in constructive activities for the participants themselves and their social surroundings. They are also important in the context of preventing school bullying and promoting positive behaviors. Cowie and Hutson (2005) described the various types of activities included in anti-bullying peer support schemes and discussed their relevance to bystander behaviors. They found that research indicates a number of advantages, including the teacher's conclusions that the school environments becomes safer and more caring as well as that peer relationships improves in general.



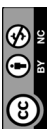
4. The role of teacher in model and provide opportunities to practice prosocial activities

The assumption that teachers can do a lot to stop peer violence at school may be trivial, but it is true and essentially crucial. The role of the teacher in this situation is not limited to the implementation of preventive programs. The very attitude and behavior of the teacher, which the students observe daily, may be essential. These issues cannot be indifferent, because it is the attitudes and behavior of the teacher that may determine the effectiveness of any other measures taken at school to prevent and reduce violence. The importance of teacher knowledge and skill development, and the willingness to intervene in bullying situations are important factors in decreasing bullying behaviors in schools. When teachers show a willingness to use interventions to help victimized children, there is less peer victimization and greater willingness to help other students (Espelage, Polanin & Low, 2014; Letendre, Ostrander & Mickens, 2016).

It is a truism to say that the teacher is the person who is decisive in the process of school education. Teachers are important actors in the theater of school life, if only because of their important role in the process of educating young generations, or because of the amount of time spent together with students and their responsibility for students. The daily activities of teachers and their consequences build a network of connections between students and teachers, thus creating a certain context, an arena for their daily interactions. Already in the Delors Report (1996) it was noted that the future of education will depend not on the amount of knowledge provided by the teacher, but on the strength of the influence of his personality. Teacher's psycho-pedagogical skills, knowledge and features are one of the important determinants of the effectiveness of the educational process. Moreover, the presence and actions of a teacher constitute a certain model of behavior in educational dynamism. Thus, the personal example of the teacher, the moral values he presents and the attitude towards students are important instruments for shaping and consolidating the desired attitudes of children and youth (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2015). The internality, conditions for the personal development process are extremely important, because just at this stage the most important qualities are formed for a future successful member of society. In this regard, the educational environment should create comfortable conditions for healthy and harmonious emotional and physical development of the individual. Situations that threaten healthy personal development, such as bullying or aggression from other students, must be eradicated.

The teacher, apart from being a role model, should undertake various planned activities. It is about didactic and educational activities planned by him, as well as strategies defined by the school. Preferably, bullying prevention should be part of the school's organizational culture. But it should be noticed that it is a coherent and interconnected set of activities that covers all children (from elementary school to high school). In addition, the teacher should have a clear plan of action in case bullying was not prevented. It is the school's task to localize bullying in time and minimize damage to the entire school environment. In this regard, the need for the formation of professional competence among teachers in the creation of psychologically safe and comfortable educational conditions is beyond doubt. Teachers must design a psychologically safe educational environment, evaluate its parameters, and regulate student behavior to ensure safe educational needs. Moreover, they should be able to communicate with children, recognize their dignity, understand and accept them, analyze the real state of affairs in the study group, maintain a friendly atmosphere in the children's team, have a professional attitude to help any child, regardless of his real educational capabilities, behavioral features, mental and physical health.

The relationship with the teacher is one of the main factors influencing the incidence of bullying (Mucherah et al., 2018). Pupils should be convinced that in the event of conflict situations, they can easily ask adults for help (Eliot et al., 2010). Bullying is less common in schools where teachers and other staff necessarily intervene, witnessing or learning about an attack (Laftman, Östberg, & Modin, 2017). Thus, if every teacher does everything possible in his lessons in terms of suppressing this kind of behavior from the aggressor and try to create the maximum of success situations for the victims, the atmosphere in the classroom and outside the classroom will change dramatically. Teachers can systematically conduct classroom hours and have conversations about bullying. As a result, children will be more informed about their rights, duties, possible responsibility for their inappropriate behavior. The teacher should interact with students, preventing negative situations as much as possible. On the other hand, in educational and preventive interactions, one cannot focus solely on negative behaviors. Positive and prosocial behaviors should be fostered, and appropriate situations



should be created for students to engage in. For instance, prosocial collective activity will create a friendly atmosphere and mutual responsibility in the school team. The teacher should also create opportunities for students to acquire various competences, which on the one hand can be useful in a situation of peer violence, but also build the resources of the individual.

5. Conclusions

One of the most profound influences on the human experience is the interaction with other individuals, especially among adolescents and particularly within an educational setting. School life provides experiences relevant for the social and emotional development of students, learning new behaviors and skills, shaping identity and character. Despite the potential benefits to both the students being served and the peer leaders providing the support, as well as the growing use of these programs in creating a positive school climate and bullying prevention, the body of research on the effects of the peer leadership experiences on the peer leaders themselves is still relatively underdeveloped. Difficulties may be related to the attitude of the whole school or teachers themselves to this type of activities. This may be due to lack of understanding of such activities or trust in young people. Still, the dominant approach in school bullying prevention is the traditional disciplinary approach to bullies and strengthening the victim. However, the whole school approach is gaining importance and perhaps within the framework of such activities, the peer leadership programs discussed above and their variants will probably be applicable. In addition, every school is required to develop its prevention program, which means the design of system solutions in the school environment, adjusted to the capabilities, problems and needs of the environment. In this type of strategy may and should be a place to promote positive and prosocial behavior of the youth and to build a social capital of the school.

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