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Successful Bullying Prevention: a Curriculum Based on Cooperative Learning – Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract: At the level of pre-university education units in Romania, there is a visible concern for identifying the most effective strategies to prevent bullying in parallel with the development of social skills for positive interaction. In accordance with these trends, this work aims to identify some educational strategies to prevent bullying that value the dynamics of cooperation. Thus, in the present study we propose to present the theory of social interdependence from the perspective of cooperative learning in the prevention of bullying. In the scientific literature it is shown that students who have more experiences of cooperation have an increased probability of not developing individualistic tendencies or engaging in intentional acts of aggression. On the other hand, social dominance theories show that through competition students compete for a place in dominance hierarchies and may have harmful intentions.
The findings of various researchers show that cooperation is an effective strategy against bullying both in secondary school and in primary school. Cooperative learning significantly reduces bullying because bullies and victims share a tendency to be uncooperative. It was also observed that the results of cooperative learning on prosocial ability they have related by the improvement of the relationship between students. Given that bullies prefer to dominate rather than be cooperative, while victims lack social interaction skills, we believe that the success of bullying prevention is found in a curriculum centered on cooperative learning. Therefore, the design of such a curriculum is important from the perspective of developing students' cooperation and interrelationship skills as a strategy to prevent bullying.

Keywords: *bullying; social dominance and comparison; social interdependence; cooperative leaning.*

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Statistical data - necessary arguments

In the last decade, the problem of bullying has led to a series of to know the extent of this phenomenon at the European level. According to the study *Frequency of bullying in European countries 2018* (Clark, 2022) a considerable number of students aged 15 years declare that they were victims of bullying at least several times a month in certain European countries. According to this study, Romania ranks third at the community level, after Russia (37%) and Lithuania (35%), with a 34% incidence of students who are victims of bullying. At the opposite pole, the safest schools are they are in the Netherlands (12%) and Portugal (14%).

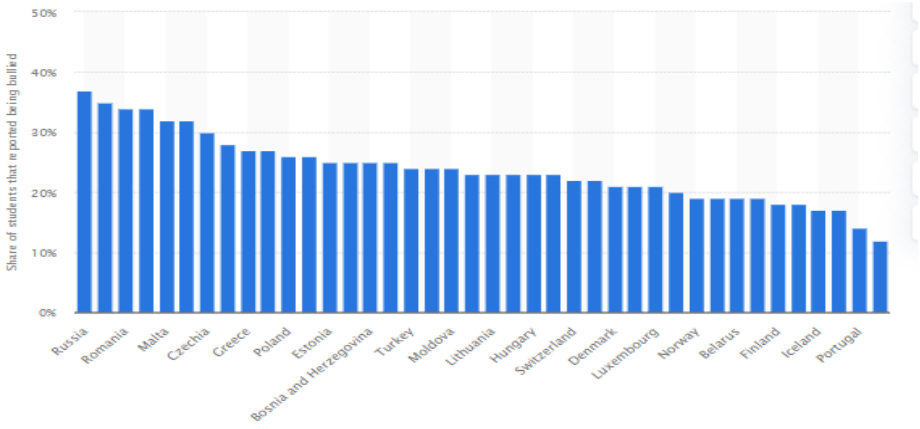


Figure 1. Frequency of bullying in European countries 2018 (Clark, 2022)

Source: Author's own conception

Seen as a threat to children's well-being and at the same time as an indicator of global social development, bullying quickly generated intense concerns for politicians and specialists. In the report *Developing a Global Indicator on Bullying of School-Aged Children* (Richardson & Hiu, 2018) the authors analyzed the existing surveys in schools around the world and establishing an indicator of the risk to which they are exposed to bullying.

The results of this documentation highlight the fact that bullying is present in very different degrees worldwide and is a complex phenomenon with multiple forms of manifestation. According to these statistics, Romania has a high global risk degree, with a rate of 56.95% of students experiencing bullying. Comparatively analyzing the degree of global harassment risk in

Romania with the rest of the countries on the globe, we notice that Romania has a score close to that of countries such as: the Dominican Republic (59, 93), Ghana (58, 40%), Nepal (58, 12), Oman (58%), Senegal (57, 30%), South Africa (61.67%) and Turkey (58.92%).

According to some American studies (Nansel et al., 2001) almost 30% of primary and secondary school students have been involved in bullying situations, as aggressors or as victims. If witnesses are also included, the situation is reached where almost every student was involved in a certain way in a situation of aggression (Olweus, 2003).

Secondary school students are more frecquently involved in conflict situations such as bullying (Robers et al., 2013). The experience of bullying is extremely traumatic, in the short, mediu and long term, for the victims of aggression, but especially for teenagers, who, due to specific cognitive and social changes, are particularly vulnerable. Thus, at the beginning of adolescence, children show a physiological response to the stress caused by bullying (Stroud et al., 2009) and, as such, face problems in training the ability to self-regulate (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2019). As a result, Thus, emotional and behavioral problems can appear immediately that can perpetuate themselves over time and can degenerate into violent behavior, drug use and suicide in late adolescence and at the beginning of adult life (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Ttofi et al., 2012; Ttofi et al. al., 2016; Van Geel et al., 2014).

These data are worrying and that's why efforts are needed to identify the most appropriate prevention and intervention measures in bullying. Prevention programs are usually focused on informing and training students, teachers, and parents about the causes and manifestations of bullying behaviors, but it seems that this did not lead to the expected results.

The psychosocial causes of bullying

An aspect of a psychosocial nature that must be taken into account in the analysis of the causal factors of bullying is the one theorized by the theory of social dominance. Initially this theory conceptualized dominance as that way of thinking of a person that values inequality and the placement of the belonging group in a dominant position compared to the others (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), more recently, it is considered a reflection of a person's desire to personal dominance over others manifested in form of the need for power, control and interpersonal malice, as well as with indifference and social detachment (Altemeyer, 1998). Other authors have appreciated that the desire to dominate it starts with a conception according to which the world is unfair to the weak, only the strong being victorious.

Thus, social dominance theories claim that people who have this way of thinking are more competitive and more likely to produce aggressive behaviors in order to impose themselves on the weaker and obtain power, control and resources (Duckitt, 2006).

Another cause underlying the exacerbation of aggressive behaviors is the inclination of some people towards social comparison, embodied in the desire to hold or maintain a position of visible superiority in behavioral terms at the level of conduct, competitive motivation, concern for winning, for different social positions socially validated, the tendency to show a duplicitous, malicious behavior towards those who could affect the socially desirable position. Social comparison leads to competitive behavior, when the context favors it (for example: attractive rewards, few or weak competitors, favorable conditions in obtaining the expected result, social category of competitors, etc. (Garcia et al., 2013) but also when the need to compete has turned into a way of being, when there is an orientation towards performance objectives in one or more fields, when relevant situations arise, desirable for the competitor that he wants to own.

Often the school context is favorable to social comparison, which determines a series of negative behaviors such as: theft, cheating, sabotage or bullying. Numerous studies have shown that competitive tendencies in the classroom, especially the desire for social success, are correlated with self-reported aggression (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). Both cyberbullying and behavioral bullying were based on the desire for self-improvement of high school students (Menesini et al., 2013), and social comparison and the stimulation of competition practiced in the classroom announced self-reported bullying among students (Di Stasio et al., 2016).

Another psychosocial aspect not to be neglected is the fact that victims of bullying are socially vulnerable because they usually have no friends, are isolated, rejected by others once they have been bullied and are unlikely to get out of the vicious circle of isolation. But students who have a consistent social network are less at risk of being bullied. Psychosociologists believe that a solution to the increased incidence of aggressive behaviors would be an approach that capitalizes on the psychosocial aspects underlying intimidation and victimization, especially the relational aspects between the victim and the aggressors. Thus, it was observed that the aggressors are those who associate based on behavioral-attitudinal compatibilities, sharing the same mentality with regard to those who are not part of their group. Given this dynamic, it is considered that increasing the contexts in which students have the opportunity to relate, get to know each other, form and support friendships is a more appropriate way to prevent the occurrence of

bullying (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Social psychology research believes that the most appropriate context in which this desired can be achieved is that of positive social interdependence, i.e. cooperation.

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Cooperation as a form of positive interdependence

Understanding the role and importance of cooperation starts from one of the oldest research traditions in social psychology - that of social interdependence. According to the theory of social interdependence studied by the psychosociologist Morton Deutsch since 1949 (Deutsch,1949) positive interdependence is the key ingredient for creating a prosocially oriented environment. He observed that people depend on each other in two different ways: positively and negatively, depending on how they set the goals of the relationship, which in turn determines how they interact and the results they will achieve.

Positive interdependence describes the interaction situation in which individuals cooperate, encourage each other, facilitate their efforts to achieve the goals of the group. Positive interdependence exists when a positive correlation is established between the participants in terms of achieving the goals of the people involved in a situation, they come to the conclusion that they must cooperate so that each and all together reach the intended ends.

In this situation, participants exchange resources, support each other emotionally, support, promote and celebrate the success of others, which increases interpersonal attraction and acceptance, new friendships are strengthened and formed, social isolation is less likely. Positive feelings arising from collective goal achievement are transferred to group members, resulting in a positive feedback loop that sustains future interpersonal attraction and acceptance (Johnson et al., 2014). Positive interdependence

results in positive interaction between members of a group and correlates with prosocial behaviors. Social interaction theory and research posits that positive conditioning and the subsequent positive effects in relational terms that they produce can cause participants to revise their perceptions and attitudes regarding the social value of others (Bierman, 2004).

On the other hand, negative interdependence is that situation in which the participants block each other in the effort to achieve their proposed goals, which can degenerate into aggressive behaviors, the people involved considering that personal goals can be achieved if their partners fail (Johnson & Johnson, 2005).

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning based on the positive interdependence of participants is the foundation for the most active learning methods e.g problem- based learning, team-based learning, peer-assisted learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). When participants cooperate, they are conditioned in different ways to contribute to the collective achievement of the objectives. Thus in a cooperative learning situation, many types of positive interdependence can be encountered (Johnson & Johnson, 1989): *goal interdependence* that occurs when teachers require a single outcome for whole group activity*; reward interdependence* that occurs when teachers provide a reward to the group if everyone performs above a certain level at the end of the learning activity; *resource interdependence* when one group member distributes materials needed for the whole group's activity; *role interdependence* which involves fulfilling different roles, e.g., tracking group status, taking notes in group discussions but contributing to the completion of a single task; *task interdependence* that occurs for example when each student has a different component of a project or presentation for a lesson to be completed successfully; and *identity interdependence*, when groups establish their own name or symbol to develop a sense of belonging to the group. All these forms of positive interdependence can be used in a single lesson, encouraging students to participate and collaborate to achieve collective goals.

Conditions for effective cooperation

Any learning task in any domain can be organised cooperatively, but there are conditions on when and how they can be used appropriately. Positive interdependence can lead to effective cooperation, but it requires some essential conditions: *positive interdependence, individual and group*

accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, face-to-face promotional interaction and group processing (Johnson &Johnson, 2008).

Thus, *positive interdependence* presupposes the fact that group members must perceive the fact that they are dependent on their group mates in achieving the common goal, the efforts of each person being important for personal and collective success. This condition can be met by training all or some of the types of interdependence mentioned above. Team members depend and rely on each other to achieve the goal. The effort of each member of the group is necessary and indispensable for the success of the group.

The second condition, *individual and group accountability*, involves the individual responsibility of each member for achieving the goal of the entire group. Individual accountability means we learn together but perform alone/separately. Group learning activities must also train individual responsibility to ensure that students are stimulated to contribute to the group's success (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Individual accountability may include assessment in the form of a random oral test conducted by the teacher at the end of the lesson/learning unit (with the potential to reward the whole group). All students in a group must be responsible for contributing their share of the work and mastering the entire learning material for the group's success.

Interpersonal and small group skills goes to the fact that in cooperation groups, interpersonal and group skills such as communication, decision-making, conflict management, task completion, group members appreciation are necessary for the functioning of a group. The training of interpersonal and group skills can also be ensured by: attending class on time, respecting break and work time, encouraging students to listen to the ideas of other group members, in parallel with discouraging interruptions or the use of language that can be seen as a personal attack, potential conflicts being thus controlled.

Face-to-face promotive interaction determines the sharing of resources from each to each, participants supporting each other academically and personally. In this context, group thinking is also formed, the perception that the group develops on how it worked and how it should be worked even better (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Although some group work can be shared and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members giving each other feedback, challenging reasoning and conclusions, and perhaps most importantly, helping each other, supporting each other, applauding and encouraging each other for any success that brings them closer to achieving the group's goals.

The group will be encouraged to describe to each other useful and unhelpful behaviors and actions, to make decisions about which behaviors can continue and which behaviors need to be changed in order to function more effectively in the future in this way developing (Casey, 2000) a collaborative way of thinking, through inclusion and interdependence.

In order to comply with the conditions described above, the necessary materials for carrying out the activity should be provided, the group actively participating in the achievement of well-defined, explained and controlled tasks, the effort being rewarded by rewards given to all members.

The teacher's role in promoting cooperative activities

While small group activities have great potential to stimulate student learning, most researchers agree that simply being placed in groups does not automatically guarantee learning. The extent to which students benefit from working with others depends on the nature of participation in group work, i.e. the quality and depth of discussions, the extent to which they give and receive help, share knowledge, build on others' ideas and justify their own ideas, as well as the extent to which they recognize and resolve contradictions between their own perspectives and those of other students (Webb, 2009).

The literature reveals in this context the role of the teacher who should achieve: explicit coaching of collaborative social skills (e.g. encouraging participation, checking understanding of the task, encouraging sharing ideas with others and asking for clarification from group mates), establishing expectations for group behaviour, monitoring activity to identify and reward desirable behaviours, organizing groups by isolating them from other groups in the classroom, members of own group sitting face to face to achieve an increased degree of interaction, marking/celebrating common products/outcomes, rather than individual ones, whenever possible, encourage the feelings of support, acceptance, concern and commitment that are part of collaborative situations, empower and make students aware of their obligations and responsibilities to collaborators, to do a guided review of the group's performance after the activity is over, by discussing positive and negative aspects, setting goals for improving future performance, and providing positive reinforcement for behavior during the lesson that contributed to the group's success (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Effects of cooperative learning

Optimally organised cooperative activities result in three broad categories of effects identified by reviewing the impressive number of studies now available: *achievement effort, positive interpersonal relationships, and psychological adaptation* (Johnson &Johnson, 2019).

Their identification was based on the comparative analysis of the effects obtained in cooperative, competitive and individualistic organised activities.

Thus, achieving a common goal through cooperation leads to better performance than through competition or individualistic efforts. Such a result is found in the meta-analytic study on a total 64 studies on the effects of performing various sports, motor and technical tasks in cooperative, competitive and individual condition. Cooperation also has effects on motivation, especially intrinsic motivation (Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004) because by performing collectively, each member of the group receives validation of his or her own competence, and the solution identified in the group become individual solutions.

Interpersonal relationships become numerous and overwhelmingly positive in groups where cooperation is used, with participants developing a sens of relatedness, connection, and mutual support. This is noticeable and of importance in groups where members are diverse in terms of intellectual ability, ethnicity, cultural, social and gender background (Johnson & Johnson, 2019)

The positive relationships resulting from cooperative learning increase responsibility towards the group, school and reduce absenteeism, increase involvement in school activities, commitment of members to academic goals, assumption of difficult tasks, persistence in work, resistance to frustration, ability to defend the group against external criticism or attack, the ability to listen and be influenced by peers. Cooperation, compared to competition or individual work, also results in task- and person-oriented social support, resulting in psychological health and high self-esteem.

Many studies and researches carried out in the last decades validate these positive psychological effects of cooperation. Thus, the study by Van Ryzin, Roseth, and Biglan (2020) analyzed the effects of cooperative learning on students' socially oriented behavior. On a sample of 1,890 students (47.1% female, 75.2% white) from 15 middle schools, it was observed that, during two years, using cooperation in school activities significantly improved the social involvement of the participants. Much research in the field has found that cooperative learning has strong positive effects on

interpersonal attraction, social acceptance, motivation, and academic achievement across all schooling levels and in all school subjects (Ginsburg-Block et al., 2006; Johnson et al. al., 2014).

In a meta-analytic review of 148 studies that included more than 17,000 adolescents, cooperative learning was the cause of higher academic achievement and the intensification of positive relationships with peers, thus the premises of mutual influence. Cooperative learning has also been found to have moderate to increased effects on reducing victimization, aggression, and alcohol and tobacco use (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Numerous other studies have added to the list of positive effects positive feelings towards others, towards school in general, stronger academic self-esteem (Johnson &Johnson, 2008).

Another study, also of meta-analytic type, carried out by Roseth, Johnson & Johnson in 2008 confirmed what the theory of social interdependence had predicted, that purchases and numerous positive social relations are associated with cooperation and not with competition. If positive interdependence results in positive interaction and can be positively correlated with prosocial behaviors, then negative interdependence can be correlated with aggression, the intention to cause unwanted effects on someone (Stanne et al., 1999).

These studies demonstrate that the activities carried out through cooperation are essential in terms of personal changes and adaptation to the social context. Thus, as a result of the support received from the others in the group, of the feelings of security, belonging to a community, can observe the increase in self-confidence, self-esteem, the formation and training of social, communication, collaboration and support skills. Putting different students together can determine a reduction of prejudices and the activation of empathy (Pettigrew& Tropp, 2008) which will latter make it easier to relate and accept other, important aspects in the prevention of bullying.

Conclusions

This theoretical analysis was initiated in order to identify how the so far anti-bullying programs succeeded to reduce the actual bullying by providing specialized information on the phenomenon to the parents, students, teachers. Statistical data from the scientific literature we used for analysis show that the prevention carried out through information and training programs for students, teachers, and parents regarding the causes and forms of manifestation of bullying behaviors did not lead to the expected results. Taking into account the psychosocial dynamics of bullying, psychosociologists believe that the most appropriate would be an approach

based on the analysis of the social causes of the occurrence of these behaviors.

In this sense, the theories of social dominance and that of comparison are very useful, which bring into focus a view of reality valued as a competitive scene in which only the strong win. This representation determines a permanent competitive relationship with others, a desire to gain or maintain a privileged position that generates appreciation from others. Under these conditions, any obstacle in achieving the goal leads to aggressive behavior. Comparison often leads to competition, especially when it is favored by external, contextual factors that sometimes end with the appearance of undesirable behaviors such as: theft, lying, cheating, sabotage or bullying.

As such, prevention is proposed through the use of positive interdependence between members of small groups, such as those in schools, where students are used to working towards a common goal, sharing their resources, working, enjoying but being responsible individually and collectively for results. This requires face-to-face interaction, the formation of skills to work in a group, to think, communicate, decide together. The organizers of these groups are primarily responsible for creating these conditions, who must initiate these ways of working in any discipline, in any learning context.

The effects of cooperative learning are multiple and have been included in three categories: increasing motivation and effort to achieve performance, optimizing interpersonal relationships and transformation in the personal sphere with adaptative effects on a social level. The results in the area of relationships are clear, diverse and profound and they consist in the intensification of interpersonal relationships, the connection to the life of group, the reduction of school absenteeism, the involvement in school activities, the increase of responsibility towards collective activities, school tasks, but also feeling of empathy, the reduction of prejudices and the willingness to share with others the joys and failures. As such, there are scientifically argued premises that by increasing the contexts of cooperation it is possible to prevent the occurrence of bullying situations.

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