ALEKSANDRA TŁUŚCIAK-DELIOWSKA

The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Institute of Education

BULLYING AS A SUBJECT OF ADOLESCENTS' ANALYSIS. THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS IDENTIFIED BY THEIR PEERS AS BULLIES, VICTIMS AND PROSOCIAL STUDENTS

Abstract: The paper reports on a portion of the empirical data collected as part of the research project, whose purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of bullying from the perspective of students. In addition, the project assumed the exploration of the social context of the classroom, with special emphasis on the diversity of students' roles in the classroom and their position (status) in the peer group. The research was carried out using various methods and techniques of quantitative and qualitative strategies. The paper presents part of the findings from two classes of middle school. The characteristics of the social structure of the analysed classes were presented and focus group interviews carried out in three groups of students who were identified, on the basis of peer nomination, as bullies, victims and prosocial students were analysed. Due consideration was given to the way youths understand different types of behaviour that make up peer bullying, to witness behaviour and its determinants, identification with various participant roles the bullying process, as well as to possible strategies for solving the problems in question. The findings presented in the paper document the specificity, but also – despite many similarities – different perspectives of students who vary in the roles they take in their peer group and in their sociometric status.

Keywords: peer bullying, adolescence, peer group, social status, group roles, focus group interviews.

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE AND BULLYING AND ITS SOCIAL NATURE

School violence is a configuration of various aggressive types of behaviour. Bullying is a distinctive form of violence observed when intentional, repeated aggression is directed against an individual on a long-term basis. Another characteristic of bullying is an imbalance of power between the bully and his/her victim. The power differential is often due to physical, psychological or social factors, which makes it difficult for the student-victim to defend himself/herself against aggressive actions (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli, 2010; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017).

Focusing on the intentionality of behaviour allows referring to the bully's motivation and distinguishing between intentional harm and unintentional behaviour resulting in possible damage to another person. The power differential assumes an abuse of power by a strong (though not necessarily physically strong) bully towards a victim who is helpless and unable to defend himself/herself. Repetitiveness, in turn, allows distinguishing bullying from a single aggressive act and is significant in terms of the psychological state of the victim experiencing aggressive behaviours and interventions.[1]

The depiction of violence and bullying at school usually comes down to the analysis of various expressions of aggression and emerging forms of bullying, which can be divided into two categories: traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Whereas traditional bullying is usually identified with physical aggression (hitting, kicking), verbal abuse (name-calling, degrading comments) and indirect acts (exclusion from the group, spreading rumours), cyberbullying is usually associated with verbal and indirect acts of aggression by means of Internet and ICT (Tokunaga, 2010).

An attempt to understand the complex nature of bullying leads to the recognition of the social character of this phenomenon and the identification of all its participants. These are not only pupils who are bullies and victims (alternatively bully-victims), but also witnesses. Within the student-witness group (bystanders), there are assistants of the bully, reinforcers of the bully, outsiders and defenders of the victim (Coloroso, 2002; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, pp. 93–97).

Assistants of the bully are students who join the leader who is bullying another student and actively help him/her.

Supporters of the bully are students who, through their behaviour, confirm the bully's belief that his/her actions are right and reinforce them, for example by verbally encouraging aggressive behaviours, cheering on the bully or laughing at the victim. Even subtle positive feedback by verbal or non-verbal cues is probably rewarding for the bully.

Outsiders do nothing in a bullying situation, they try to remain disengaged onlookers or show their independence and lack of commitment (see Komendant-Brodowska, 2014b, p. 19).

Defenders of the victim, in turn, take sides with the victim. Their actions may be indirect, for example when they turn to a third party for help or comfort the victim after the bullying incident and try to provide support in various ways. They may also become involved in a direct intervention in the bullying situation and try to stop the bully and/or stand up for the victim (van der Ploeg et al., 2017). Defending may be seen as a kind of prosocial behaviour. Students through an active support and consolation of the victim show that his/her fate is not indifferent to them (Veenstra et al., 2013).

This type of behaviour is related to the sense of self-efficacy and affective empathy towards the victim (Poyhonen, Juvonen, Salmivalli, 2010). Moreover, students who take the role of the active defender make an impact on other students by taking a strong stance against bullying. However, interventions are effective only by those students who are popular in the peer group, and therefore enjoy a high social status in it (Salmivalli et al, 2011).

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[1] These attributes, the way they are identified, and their practical implications are discussed in detail in Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, pp. 17–31.

A high status in the peer group – associated with popularity and power – is also enjoyed by bullies, contrary to popular belief that they are low-status and socially maladjusted individuals (see Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, pp. 72–75).

The least popular are students who fall victim to bullying[2], which is explained by Rozemarijn van der Ploeg and her colleagues (2017) in two ways. Firstly, the bully deliberately chooses a victim who is his/her opposite and therefore has a low status in the peer group corresponding to the lack of prestige and support from friends, which means that none of his/her colleagues will defend him/her. This has been confirmed, among others in the studies of Veenstra and colleagues (2013) (see also Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017b). Secondly, the victim's status in the peer group tends to deteriorate over a longer-period of time. With time, the victim is simply perceived as unworthy of getting into a relationship with. Both explanations are not mutually exclusive. In addition, victims of bullying may defend one another, which is due to their empathic understanding of the difficult experience of victimisation. However, this is probably not interpreted as opposing a strong and popular bully, but rather as supporting a fellow sufferer, which is why they neither become more popular nor gain a higher status in the group (van der Ploeg et al., 2017, p. 4).

On the basis of the information provided, it should be stated that the social context is important for the phenomenon of peer bullying. It occurs more often in school environments in which the bully's aggressive behaviours are reinforced by his/her peers, that is, the phenomenon is sustained by them and victims are rarely defended. What is more, it turns out that the bully is more responsive to the lack of positive reinforcements from his/her peers than to support provided for the victim, which – as already mentioned – does not have to take place in the presence of the bully (Salmivalli, Voeten, Poskiparta, 2011; Saarento, Boulton, Salmivalli, 2015).

THE PROBLEM OF PEER BULLYING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS – THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Peer bullying is considered a significant problem in schools around the world (see e.g. Craig et al., 2009), including Poland (Komendant-Brodowska, 2014a). For this reason, the subject has been intensively researched by representatives of various scientific disciplines (although with a clear dominance of developmental and educational psychologists) for over four decades. The empirical studies undertaken in this field are primarily focused on the diagnosis of the phenomenon (see Hymel and Swearer, 2015, Komendant-Brodowska, 2014a). These studies are most often conducted in the quantitative research paradigm using self-report and peer-report methods, with the participation of large (often representative) groups of students of different ages. The data obtained in this way is then subjected to more or less advanced statistical analyses, which enable to make generalisations, verify and systematise the knowledge of this phenomenon. A dominant perspective used in the analyses is the personological (individual)

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[2] An unfavourable, from the point of view of psychosocial functioning in the group, is also the situation of bully-victims, also known as provocative victims. Because of their behaviours (typical both of the victim and the bully Menesini, Salmivalli, 2017), which are destructive not only for themselves, but also for the peer group, they face a high risk of being rejected by the group (see Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, pp. 84–85).

perspective, which focuses on the individual differences in the experience of bullying as well as the determinants of these differences (see Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a).

On the basis of previous studies in this area, it can be concluded that there is a consensus on the incidence of specific forms of violence at school and the relationship between aggressive behaviours and the type of school, different attributes of school and family environments, students' age and sex and their different personality traits[3] (see Surzykiewicz, 2000; Commander-Brodowska, 2014, pp. 42–45; Hymel, Swearer, 2015; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a; Menesini, Salmivalli, 2017).

Researchers use qualitative strategies in this problem area less often. This may be surprising given the above-mentioned social nature of the phenomenon and the need to learn and understand its complex context. Sandra L. Bosacki, Zopito A. Marini and Andrew V. Dane (2006) emphasise that although quantitative research provides a lot of relevant and proven information on school bullying, it doesn't allow discussing one's own understanding of the problem and listening to the voice of children and youths. And although it's mainly students who participate in quantitative studies using the aforementioned self-report method, their answers and interpretations of behaviours are limited by assumptions and interpretations made by adults. Important discourses and nuances may be overlooked in this way.

For this reason, Timo Terasahjo and Christina Salmivalli (2003) express a clear need to conduct research using the qualitative methodology, with special emphasis on the meaning and understanding of students' individual behaviours and their way of understanding and interpreting the social world.

In the authors' opinion, this different perspective of students and adults may make the implemented preventive and educational programmes ineffective because they are developed by adults and are based on their understanding of bullying. Individual behaviours, however, may be perceived, sensed and justified differently by adults and students.

Based on the overview of existing qualitative studies conducted with the participation of students and dedicated to school bullying, two distinct research directions of these empirical studies were noted (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2016). The first one focuses on the participants of the research who are treated as experts, and the subject of research is their interpretations and meanings of behaviours in bullying situations. The second one focuses on the analysis of the context of aggressive behaviours and the knowledge of peer culture through, for example, ethnographic research.

This type of research fills in the gaps in knowledge about bullying and reveals new aspects that can be explored in subsequent studies. The results of qualitative research become the basis and inspiration for making new hypotheses and paving the way for further research, be it quantitative or qualitative. The need to conduct qualitative research in this area also results from the need to design effective educational interventions, which becomes possible only after explaining and understanding individual elements that make up bullying and studying the „private theories" of students involved in it. Although they cannot be generalised to the entire population, they extend the repertoire of explanations, which may contribute to a better and more comprehensive understanding of the „social world" of children and youths.

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[3] The review of these findings goes beyond the scope of this paper.

GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project whose part of data was presented and analysed in this paper was implemented in 2017. The scientific goal of the project was to gain a better insight into the perception of bullying and many of its aspects from the perspective of students. In addition, the social context of the classroom was explored with special emphasis on various participant roles in the classroom (in relation to peer bullying) and their status in the peer group. The research was carried out using various methods and techniques of quantitative and qualitative strategies. The paper presents part of empirical material collected in middle school.[4]

THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

The research was carried out in one primary school and one middle school. One class from each year group was invited to participate in the research, from Year 4 of primary school to Year 3 of middle school. In total, 90 students aged 9–16 participated in the study (with the average age of 12.53 years old), including 41 girls (46%) and 49 boys (54%). The paper presents the analysis of the findings obtained in middle school, from which a group of 41 students of class 2 (n = 25) and class 3[5] (n = 16) participated in the study (which constitutes 46% of the sample), including 18 girls (44 %) and 23 boys (56%). The students were aged 13–16 (with the average age of 14.32 years old).

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE TEST PROCEDURE AND THE TOOLS USED

Stage one – quantitative research. During the first stage of the research, the following techniques were used: (1) „Plebiscite of kindness and reluctance" of J. Korczak, (2) an adopted version of the „guess-who" technique and (3) „Students' General School Experience" survey prepared for the needs of the research.[6]

„Plebiscite of kindness and reluctance" provides insight into the overall social relations of a given group. The respondents received a list of students from their class and were asked to express their attitude towards them using a scale of 1–5: like a lot (++), like a little (+), neither like nor dislike (0), dislike a little (–), dislike a lot (––). On this basis, it was possible to determine the position (status) of each student in the group (from acceptance through isolation to rejection) and his/her emotional attitude towards his/her classmates (from strong liking to strong disliking).

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[4] The presentation and analysis of the entire research findings will be the subject of a separate monograph.

[5] Due to the education reform in Poland introduced on 1 September 2017, whose one of the objectives was to close middle schools, Year 1 of middle school does not function. The research was carried out in the corresponding Year 7 of primary school, but it will not be the subject of the analysis in this paper.

[6] The paper doesn't present the findings obtained by means of the survey, therefore its construction and content will not be discussed.

An adopted version of the „guess-who" technique was prepared to identify various student roles related to peer bullying based on peer nomination technique. The subjects were presented with a description of a behaviour and were asked to indicate classmates whose behaviour matched the description. On the basis of an overview of the source literature, 13 descriptions were developed to identify the following roles of students: (1) the bully, (2) the assistant of the bully, (3) the reinforcer of the bully, (4) the victim of bullying, (5) the outsider, (6) the defender of the victim, (7) prosocial. The descriptions were arranged alternately. Most of the roles were related to bullying, but there were other ones, such as the prosocial role or the role of the outsider, which students may take in a group where bullying doesn't occur. The roles were distinguished on the basis of the roles most often identified in the analysed phenomenon (see Salmivalli et al., 1996; Komendant-Brodowska, 2014b; Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a). It was assumed that not every role must occur in each class because it depends on the individual characteristics of students, as well as on the conditions and situations in a given peer group (context). Moreover, some roles may be combined and played by the same students, e.g. the role of the defender with the prosocial role, the role of the bully with the role of the assistant and reinforcer, the role of the victim with the role of the outsider, and the role of the bully-victim. On the basis of the data obtained through the peer nomination, the students were divided into groups for the second stage of the research.

Second stage – qualitative research. After analysing the empirical data collected during the first stage, the second stage was organised a month later. The second stage of the research was based on focus group interviews (FGI) conducted in small groups of students identified on the basis of the data from the first stage. 18 interviews were conducted (including 8 in middle school), which were usually held in 4–8-person groups of students.

The starting point for focus group interviews were hypothetical bullying situations presented in the form of pictorial vignettes prepared for the project by its author. The students were presented with pictorial vignettes illustrating in the right order a bullying situation, and given sufficient time to study them. After that, a facilitator led a discussion according to the previously prepared scenario.

In order to avoid suggesting or imposing any interpretations of the presented situations, the facilitator did not use the terms „offender", „victim", „bullying", „persecution", „aggression", „violence" and other related terms unless the students had already used them. While analysing the behaviours and situations of the characters of the story, the names of the characters were used and indicated in the vignettes.

In each group, two stories were analysed – two by primary school students in Years 4 to 6 and the other two by primary school students in Year 7 and middle school students in Years 2 to 3. When describing the stories, various types of peer bullying were taken into account. In total, four hypothetical stories were prepared. In middle school, the subject of analysis during the interviews was Dawid's and Monika's stories. The first story referred to homophobic bullying which involved mainly recurring physical and verbal aggression towards the boy. The second story was about cyberbullying whose victim was Monika. As a result, the girl experienced verbal aggression and peer exclusion.

THE PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Group roles and social status in the classroom

With the help of the „guess-who" technique, students taking on specific roles in the peer group related to aggressive behaviours were identified in both classes.[7] On the basis of the data, it was found that student number 20 in class 2 was identified as the bully (5 nominations), whereas student number 23 was identified as the reinforcer of the bully.

These nominations, however, do not represent the majority and the roles are not clearly identified. The students were more unanimous in their opinion about the victim and the outsider. Student number 25 was most often identified as the victim. The same student was identified by the majority of the group as the outsider. It is difficult, however, to decide whether this student isolated himself from the group because he experienced violence or whether he was humiliated in various ways for being the outsider. Student number 1 was identified as matching the description of the victim and the outsider, although the nominations were not as numerous as in the case of student number 25. Nominations related to positive behaviours were much more varied. Girls number 10 and 24, as well as boys number 13, 2 and 4 were identified as defenders. The same students were identified as prosocial students, although girls number 10, 9, 24, 22 and 3 received most nominations.

The data was supplemented with information obtained using the „Plebiscite of kindness and reluctance", thanks to which it was possible to determine the group's attitude towards each student. It was found, on the basis of the data, that the student identified as the victim and the outsider was strongly isolated by the group (he scored below average on a popularity scale). Girl number 1 and boy number 20 who were indicated by five students as bullies were in the same situation. Other students nominated for the discussed roles were accepted by their peers.

According to peer nomination concerning various participant roles in the classroom, student number 13 might have been identified as the bully as well as student number 4 who was his assistant. Students number 7 and 8 were also associated with aggressive behaviours. Student number 14 was identified as a frequently humiliated and ridiculed person (7 nominations). Three people indicated that this student kept himself to himself and avoided other people. The defenders' roles weren't clearly defined. Girl number 9 was identified as a clearly prosocial person (6 nominations), as well as boy number 15 and girl number 5 (2 nominations).

In this class, the social status of students identified as bullies was different than in class 2 class. Bullies and their assistants were accepted in the group. Students number 13 and 4 scored above average, just like student number 7. Student number 8 scored very high on a popularity scale. The student identified as the victim was isolated (a low rank on a popularity scale).

On the basis of this information, the students were divided into groups. A further part of the paper presents discussions with three groups of students who were clear-

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[7] Due to the editorial limitations of the paper, the detailed tabular presentation of data on within-group status and the graphic presentation of the nominations regarding group roles were omitted. The data is available from the author of the paper.

ly identified as bullies (students number 13, 4, 7 and 8 in class 3[8]), victims/rejected students (students number 14 in class 3 as well as students number 25 in class 2) and a group of prosocial girls (number 10, 9, 24, 22 and 3 in class 2). The following terms are used to describe these groups: bullies, victims and prosocial girls.[9]

Student analysis of hypothetical bullying situations

The subject of the analysis during group interviews was Dawid's and Monika's stories (story 1 and 2 respectively), which were presented in the form of pictorial vignettes. The plot of the first story is as follows: Dawid is a secondary school student. He is interested in fashion and cosmetology and wishes to pursue them in the future. He gets along with girls who often ask his advice about clothes. He also has a close friend, Tomasz, with whom he likes to spend his free time. Dawid's classmates call him „poof" and „pansy", humiliate him in various ways, and engage in physical aggression towards him. These episodes often occur in the presence of other students who react in different ways. Some of them laugh, some watch idly the bullying happen, some pretend not to see it, some film the bullying with their phones and publish it on the internet. Sometimes the girls stand up for him.

The second story concerned Monika's experiences. She was in a relationship with Darek, whom many girls in middle school had a crush on, including Gosia. One day, Gosia edited Monika's photo and placed it on a dating site along with Monika's personal details. Later, she shared Monika's profile, which she allegedly came across on the internet, on Facebook. Soon, Monika started receiving messages and phone calls from men who wanted to date her, and her photo was quickly spread among students. As a result, Darek broke up with Monika, the students pointed the finger at her during break time, called her names and ridiculed her on the Internet, and her colleagues froze her out.

At the very beginning of the focus group interviews, after the students retold the stories in their own words, they were asked if these situations could actually happen at school. There was no such case that someone denied any of the analysed stories.

The analysis of the characters' behaviour in story 1

The subject of the analysis was the situation of characters presented in the story with special emphasis on their current internal state, i.e. on affects and cognitive content.

The students who took part in the interviews, irrespective of their roles defined earlier by peer nomination, acknowledged Dawid's difficult situation, negative thoughts and emotions, such as sadness, feelings of humiliation, dejection and distress caused by not being accepted the way he was. Even though the bullies correctly recognised the victim's emotions, they started laughing when shown a vignette in which the boy was called „poof" and „pansy".

The interviewed students similarly perceived and interpreted the bullies' behaviour. The victims said that by harassing another student the bullies were pleased with themselves, „they think they are cool because they insult the weaker one." A similar expression was used by the bullies who said that the bullies „have fun and think they

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[8] The two boys were absent and did not take part in the discussion.
[9] These terms were not meant to stigmatise the students, but only to facilitate the reception of the paper.

are cool." However, in the opinion of the prosocial girls, the bullies thought that their „social rank was higher."

Next, the behaviour of bystanders was analysed. Different interpretations were offered to account for a boy's walking away from the scene of bullying. Most of the girls said that the boy didn't want to get involved either because he didn't care or because he wanted no part of it for fear of becoming the next victim. The victims said that he probably „knows it may hurt", whereas the bullies thought that it was none of his business. Recording bullying incidents with the mobile phone was generally seen as an activity that could bring more popularity to the person recording them if the videos were published on the Internet, but also a greater humiliation to the victim. Cheering was seen as an attempt to please the bullies. The victims didn't really have an opinion on this. The behaviour of the girl who tried to stop the bullies was interpreted as a positive action providing support for the bullied student.

Proposed solution for story 1

The victims set their hopes for solving the problem on the main character's friends. Their intervention, in their opinion, could provide emotional support, „they could somehow convince the other students to just leave him alone." The prosocial students came up with a similar solution. They emphasised that „friends are a kind of wall, a protective shield." They also suggested providing an opportunity for other people to get to know the student better so that he could be accepted, „maybe you need to show what he is like, that he is after all a nice mate."

The students didn't really believe that a teacher could change the situation. A victim justified it this way, „The teacher may give you some points or say something. Things will stay quiet for a week and then they will start again." The bullies totally ignored the role of friends, defenders and other peers. There was, however, an interesting exchange of views about the teacher's help in solving the situation.

(Facilitator): Could he be helped? Is there a solution to this situation?
(4): Yeah.
(Facilitator): What? Give me an example.
(4): To report it to a teacher or something.
(13) do (4): What can the teacher do? What can he do after school?
Silence
(Facilitator): So, the teacher can't really help and the student has to accept that that's the way it is? Nothing can be done?
(13): To change school.
(Facilitator): Who should change the school?
(13): Well, Dawid since he is laughed at.

The sbullies thought that the best solution was to change the school environment. In their opinion, it was easier for the victim to change school than for a few students to change their inappropriate behaviour.

Suggested ending to story 1

In the final task, each student participating in the interview was asked to suggest an ending to the story. The prosocial girls thought that Dawid stopped being bullied be-

cause the boys got to know him better or because they noticed that he no longer cared and had some friends. The girls also thought that „those guys who laughed at Dawid grew a conscience and they just apologised to him and stopped making fun of others."

The victims couldn't think of an ending or they didn't want to reveal their ideas (they said they had no opinion). The bullies came up with some dramatic endings, e.g. one student said, „I would draw a picture of Dawid in hospital in a bad state because he wanted to poison himself, because he wanted to be left alone."

The analysis of the characters' behaviour in story 2

The second story was analysed in the same way. It provided an example of cyberbullying and its negative consequences in the form of relational aggression towards Monika. The bullies said that her story was „true to life" and could have happened „because there are so many jealous girls." Also the prosocial girls said that the story was likely to happen because „today's girls are jealous and capable of everything."

In this case, the group discussion participants, irrespective of the group, correctly defined the victim's emotional state, describing it as „bad". They also attributed sorrow and distraught to her. The prosocial girls stated that she must have felt „horrible, because everyone has left her", whereas the victims considered her helpless.

The students claimed that the girl responsible for the whole situation was at first jealous of the boy, but then she was pleased, happy and proud of herself. Darek's situation was also analysed. In the opinion of the respondents, he might have felt deceived and betrayed „because he believes that she (Monika) has really done it", „he takes her for someone else."

The bullying situation involved also the bystanders, but the discussion focused on the witnesses to cyberbulling, who reacted in various ways to gossips about Monika. In the opinion of the prosocial girls they were shocked, laughed, „held her in contempt" but they wouldn't put themselves in the role of these witnesses: (9), „they feel that something is wrong, but instead of helping, they share the photo and laugh, and don't want to figure out what has really happened." The girls also said that it would be better „if they simply ignored the situation."

Most of the students from the group of victims would rather be online witnesses because it was safer and better and the situation had nothing to do with them. They wouldn't, however, „give likes" to it, they would prefer to sit back. One of the prosocial girls expressed a different view and empathised with the victim:

(Facilitator): [name], and what do you think?
(1): Honestly, I'd rather be someone who could help her.
(Moderator): Why?
(1): Well, sometimes I can understand how Monika feels and I would rather help her than watch what is happening to her.

An interesting situation occurred within the group of the boy bullies when they analysed witness behaviour:

(Facilitator): What about the students who see it on Facebook? How do they feel?
(13): They laugh, share the photo and laugh.
(Facilitator): Do they like it?
(13): Yeah.

(Facilitator): Why?

(4): 'Cos at least we have some fun …

(13): There's someone to laugh at.

The statement in the first person may indicate that the student identified himself with the reinforcer of the online bully. Perhaps he once behaved (or behaves) in this way. The boy bullies found Darek's situation most appealing. They argued that he was the centre of attention (they were the only group who drew attention to it during the interviews) and was liked by all the girls.

Suggested solution to story 2

Suggested solutions to the story were similar in all groups, as far as the final effect was concerned, because they required clarification of the matter, but the ways of arriving at them were slightly different. The prosocial girls suggested that the best solution, in their opinion, in this situation was „a bit of straight talk between Monika and Darek", and with Gosia as well to find out why she treated Monika the way she did. But it would be reasonable to make sure first that it was Gosia who was responsible for the whole situation.

As in the first analysed story, the teachers weren't considered capable of solving the situation. More attention was focused on the parents. The teachers appeared to be providers of information, and, according to the students, the problem could be ultimately solved by the parents. The students from the group of bullies argued that the parents could also report the case to the police, who „can track the IP address and find out who did it and from which computer." They also said with great certainty that they would be able to identify the computer's IP address themselves, it was only a matter of time.

The students from the group of victims suggested „finding the edited photo, proving that it wasn't true", and they blamed either Monika or Darek for the abuse.

Suggested ending to story 2

The prosocial girls were again in favour of ending the story with a little straight talk between Monika and Darek, during which they would explain everything and patch things up. Eventually Gosia would admit to everything. A happy ending was also proposed by the victims – Darek is in a relationship with Monika and „everything is back to normal." The boy bullies came up with something else. One student would draw a picture of „Monika at a police station, talking", and the other one a picture of „Monika and Darek, and his laughing at Gosia for doing such things."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The subject of the analysis was the social context of the school classroom and the analysis of hypothetical bullying incidents made by students divided into a group of bullies, victims and prosocial students.

It turned out that the analysed two classes in middle school are different in terms of the participant roles defined on the basis of peer nomination, as well as in terms

of sociometric status in the classroom. This can be seen as a completely natural situation, because each class is different and there are not the same roles in each group. At the same time, however, this differentiation may result from different numbers of students. Class 3 was smaller, which means that students could interact more with each other and therefore could get to know each other better than in a class where there are more students and, by extension, a large number of choices and the lack of ambiguity as opposed to class 3 where the peers' nominations were clear and the students' roles evident.

The findings obtained are confirmed in other works concerning the cohesion of the group and the functionality of bullying from the point of view of the peer group. Contrary to popular opinion, bullying occurs and is sustained in small classes, as opposed to bigger classes (see e.g. Saarento et al., 2013; Klein, Cornell, 2010). In smaller classes the cohesion of the group is greater (though it is dysfunctional due to sustained bullying) and bullies have more control over other students (which is more difficult to gain in bigger groups), so they can easily influence them (see Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, pp. 130–139). Therefore, in class 3, the problem of bullying (clear roles of bullies, assistants and victims) was identified, whereas in class 2 students displayed a variety of behaviours, including aggressive and prosocial ones. The role of the bully was not very clear in class 2. One boy was identified (by almost every fifth student) as the one displaying aggressive behaviours towards others. This student was rated below average on a popularity scale with below average unpopularity, and he was generally isolated by his peer group. In the case of class 3, the roles of the student bullies were more pronounced (more nominations).

Interestingly, the students who were identified as bullies and assistants of bullies enjoyed high and above-average popularity with low average unpopularity, and were accepted by their peer group. In classes 2 and 3, the students who were identified as victims and/or outsiders scored low on a popularity scale and were isolated by their peer group. It should be emphasised that their psychosocial functioning was the most difficult. By contrast, the students who defended others and displayed other helping behaviours were liked and accepted.

These findings correspond with the findings of other researchers relating to the popularity of bullies, victims and defenders in the peer group (see van der Ploeg et al., 2017, Veenstra et al., 2013). According to them, victims enjoyed the lowest popularity in the group, in contrast to popular and liked bullies. The exception was the situation of a student in class 2, who may not have been a systematic bully, but sometimes behaved aggressively towards others (though not very effectively), and as a result he was not accepted by the group.

On the basis of data analysis from the first stage of research, focus group interviews using the episode technique (vignettes) were conducted. The paper presents part of data from interviews conducted in three distinct groups of students defined as a group of bullies, a group of victims and a group of prosocial students. By summarising the findings and considering the similarities and differences in the analyses carried out by individual groups, several observations can be made.

Firstly, regardless of the group role and sociometric status, the students analogically described the psychological situation of the student experiencing bullying, stressing his problems and negative emotions. Secondly, the bullies talked about issues that weren't mentioned in discussions with the other two groups. For example, although they accurately described the difficult psychological situation of the victim, aggressive

behaviours made them laugh. Proposed solutions or endings to the analysed stories were „unusual", e.g. the victim's suicide or a change of school. It can be assumed that the best solution to bullying is escape, social withdrawal, and not, for example, changing bullying behaviour. These suggestions may result from a hidden belief that there is „something wrong" with the victim, which is how bullied students are usually perceived (see Pyżalski, 2015; see also Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017a, p. 152–158).

It can mean that the students who were identified by their colleagues as bullies did not really see a good way of solving the problem of bullying or realised that bulling behaviours were difficult to change. What is more, the bullies liked the situation of the boy who was the centre of attention of many girls. It was with his situation that they identified most strongly with, so again the issue of the significance of popularity of these students was raised again. Those students also appeared very self confident during focus group interviews.

In opposition to the above there are the prosocial students' considerations. They understood the victims' predicament and empathised with them, and in the analysis of both stories they focused on the role of other students, (potential) friends who could defend the victims or support them in various ways. Also, with these roles they identified themselves most. In the case of the first story, the suggested solution was to provide an opportunity to get to know the victim better, which could make the bullies realise that the boy had many fine qualities and was a valuable person. They hoped, perhaps somewhat naively, that the solution to the situation lay in appealing to the conscience of the bullies and their feelings of guilt over their aggressive behaviour. In the case of the second story, the proposed solution was constructive, because it was straight talk explaining the situation and the way to fix it. A need for „a happy ending" to both stories was typical of the student-victims, but they found it difficult (perhaps they did not know or did not want to) to give a detailed description of the possible ways of reaching it. It can mean that they were not willing to talk about the issue or that they were aware of their feelings of helplessness, or convinced that it was difficult to take action to change the victim's situation. In the case of the first story they identified themselves with the victim's potential friends who were able to help or – as in the second case – with the students who were neutral to the bullying situation.

What was interesting was how the students interpreted the motivations of the characters reinforcing the bullies in both stories. In their opinion, these students behaved this way because they wanted to please the bullies. It may mean that they wanted to be part of this group because they knew that such membership came with certain privileges, such as popularity or prestige in the group. This may confirm that the action taken by students in bulling situations is strategic and instrumental (see Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2017b).

This applies not only to the bullies' actions, but also to the bystanders who reinforce the bully, which suggests that the interviewed students were well aware of the rules governing social life and the functioning of the peer group. Their interpretations of bystanders behaviours were similar to those reported in source literature. For example, the act of leaving the scene of the incident by the student was interpreted primarily as his lack of commitment for fear of becoming the next victim or simply as the lack of care for the victim. The teacher's presumed low suitability for solving the problem of bullying was also reported in other studies (see Giza-Poleszczuk, Komendant-Brodowska, Baczko-Dombi, 2011).

Agnieszka Nowakowska and Jadwiga Przewłocka (2015) stated, on the basis of interviews with students, that victims of bullying often choose not to seek a teacher's help fearing that they will be perceived by the peer group as traitors, „snitches" or informers, which will result in their unpleasant and aggressive behaviours. The price of asking a teacher's help is so high that the student may well be wondering whether it is worth it.

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