

Being disliked and bullied: A case revealing interplay between peer status and bullying

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Abstract

To better understand chronic bullying, this school ethnographical case study mapped peer rejection processes that fuel bullying. The study focused on a case of a victimized 13-year-old girl and analysed observations of the classroom social interactions, interviews with teachers and students' essays. Thematic analysis elucidated how students, together with the class teacher, constructed the girl as having annoying personal characteristics, being a misfit to the group, and as being on the bottom of the classroom hierarchy. Next, it suggested how these processes made her more vulnerable to being bullied and not defended by teachers or classmates. The study showed that interventions in chronic bullying need to not only stop bullying, but also target the social processes underlying peer rejection.

KEYWORDS

cyberbullying, lower-secondary school, peer rejection processes, peer status, social exclusion, traditional bullying, victimization

INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of extensive prevention and intervention efforts, school bullying continues to be a common adversity in the lives of many children and adolescents (Smith, 2000; Solberg et al., 2007). School bullying takes many forms, including physical and verbal attacks, relational attacks and cyberbullying, with most victims experiencing multiple forms of bullying (Smith et al., 2008). As described by the group process approach (Salmivalli et al., 1996), bullying involves

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not only the students committing and receiving the attacks, but also other students not always directly involved. Bullying is shaped by the peer context, including differences between the peer status of the bullying and the bullied students (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Quantitative research has elucidated many group processes that contribute to the emergence of bullying (for a review see Salmivalli, 2010). It has been shown that low social status presents both a predictor as well as a consequence of bullying (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003).

Several qualitative studies brought important insights regarding mechanisms how students become rejected in peer groups, and thus more vulnerable to being a target of bullying (Bouchard et al., 2018; Lyng, 2018; Strindberg et al., 2020; Thornberg, 2010, 2015a, 2015c, 2018). The key mechanisms include labeling and stigma processes (Thornberg, 2015a), and collective construction of a classmate as a misfit to the group (Thornberg, 2010) following the traditional social misfit hypothesis (Wright et al., 1986). However, still prevention and intervention efforts need more information about the interconnectedness of peer rejection and bullying in chronic bullying cases that are particularly difficult to handle and have the most severe consequences (Hellström et al., 2021). Status disparities result not only in difficulties for the victimized student to effectively defend himself/herself, but also lead to situations in which other students fail to defend those being bullied, or even to speak up at all (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). If we better understand the peer rejection processes involved in bullying (Kousholt & Fisker, 2015), we could more effectively alleviate the plight of students being victimized at the moment, improve the situation of students at risk for long-term victimization due to their low peer status, as well as stop processes leading to bullying before they start.

The social context of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying incidents involves rich layers of social interaction, primarily among peers, but also with teachers (Olweus & Limber, 2018). Teacher attitudes and behaviours matter. Research has consistently shown that teachers may contribute to fuelling bullying, attempt to ignore it, or help stop it (for a review see Mazzone et al., 2021). To date the research has been conducted regarding the role of teachers in the social processes regarding peer status that may contribute to emergence and perseverance of bullying (Hanish et al., 2003; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). Teachers also may contribute to bullying indirectly by their pedagogical practices, behaviour intervention, or lack of intervention, and interactions with students (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012; Horton, 2019; Juva et al., 2020; Roland & Galloway, 2002). Our present work follows on this line of research by focusing on the peer rejection processes in the classroom in a study with students and teachers as participants. We employed a methodology that allowed us to record and analyse processes involved in a real-world case of long-term bullying (both traditional bullying and cyberbullying) of an eighth-grade student named Alexandra who has low peer status. The examination of the case was part of an ethnographic project addressing a broader topic of peer relations in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (a link to the studies will be added after peer review). The project aimed to elucidate the peer dynamics at work in these contexts, specifically, how students make friends, how teachers view relationships between students in the classroom, and how some students are excluded and bullied.

The present study integrated multiple perspectives on a chronic bullying case by using observations, interviews as well as essays written by students. It was based on understanding of bullying as aggressive behaviour characterized by asymmetry of power and typically also by repetitiveness (Hymel & Swearer, 2015) and aimed to elucidate peer rejection processes that fuelled the bullying, which included both traditional bullying and cyberbullying (i.e. cyberbullying means the use of the internet or other digital communication devices to insult or threaten someone—see Juvonen & Gross, 2008). The processes were investigated within a broader peer relation context, including friendships and inter-ethnic relations (Kuldas et al., 2021) of diverse (Roma and

Slovak) students. Similar to work by, for example, Robin May Schott (2014), Thornberg (2015b), Søndergaard (2012), and Sharp (1996) we attempt to reflect the social dynamics of bullying and the processes related to status in the peer group that may lead to traditional bullying and cyberbullying. These processes among students are fundamental, as they are “every bit as important as teachers and school administrators in shaping and conveying the hidden curriculum of schooling. [The] expectations, attitudes, and behaviors [stemming from these processes] undoubtedly influence our own” (Domina et al., 2019, p. 129). We focus on the dynamics between bullying and being disliked (rejected), that latter of which has been described as a key indicator of low peer status (Mayeux et al., 2011; Van den Berg & Cillessen, 2015).

The main goal of the study was to provide insights into the interplay between low peer status and being victimized by bullying. Analysing this complex case allowed us to reveal how students and teachers constructed low peer status of a student and how this positioning made the student vulnerable to being bullied. These processes were elucidated within broader classroom peer relations (friendships and inter-ethnic relations) and in the context of the perspective of the victimized student herself.

The importance of children's voices

Within the past few decades, a shift in the social sciences has been taking place. The old view which places “children as passive objects of study” has moved toward the notion of “children as researchers” (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 53). To some extent, this shift is related to what has been called “giving voice to children” (James, 2007), a project which involves methodological and epistemological issues that relate to the rhetoric of child voice, child voice as a social construction, space and child voice interrelations, evolving meanings through dialogue, accounting for silences, child voice as situated in complex power relations, the messiness of child voice, ableist assumptions and child voice, meaning as indexical, and child voice entanglements (Facca & Teachman, 2020). As James (2007, p. 262) explains: “giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social World that children's perspectives can provide.”

Within the framework of our research, we were interested in the perspective of both teachers and students, taking a more inclusive view of culture and society. We agree with Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007, p. 2) that “in this more inclusive view, rather than privileging children's voices above all others, it is more productive to integrate children into a more multivocal, multiperspective view of culture and society.” In our attempt to incorporate this paradigm, we have solicited written descriptions in the form of essays from students. In analysing these texts, we work with the theoretical and methodological models of childhood as a social construction (Blundell, 2012; Norozi & Moen, 2016) as well as the ‘child’ as an active construction of experience (Punch & Oancea, 2014). We have simply sought out ways of working with children in which they can define their own reality (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

METHODS

The research was conducted in a lower-secondary school attended by 370 students and located in an eastern Slovak town with a population of approximately 4000 residents. The research was carried out in the eighth-grade class following an agreement with the principal. The researchers

consistently monitored communication among students during breaks and lessons, with evidence of traditional bullying and cyberbullying noted as part of this observation. The present study aimed to contribute to the current knowledge by describing processes among classmates as well as among classmates and teachers that contribute to constituting connections between bullying and low status among peers.

Data collection methods

The data were collected in a single classroom in the lower-secondary school within a broader school ethnography project implemented from January to September 2019 in eastern Slovakia. Ethnography has been described as a “creative process in which data generation, theorizing, reflexivity, different modes of writing as well as social relations in the field and epistemic community intersect” (Stöckelová & Abu Ghosh, 2013, p. 7). Ethnography entails an oscillatory process of ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ from data as well as a correlation between data and theory (Nicolini, 2009, pp. 120–138) as well as “a particular mode of looking, listening and thinking about social phenomena” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 230). Data were collected using three research methods: participant observation of students and teachers, unstructured interviews with teachers, and essays written by students. The field notes consisted of research observations, interviews, thoughts, and research ideas. The procedure of using field notes followed widely used social anthropology procedures (Bernard, 2018).

Participant observation was chosen as an appropriate method for studying the school classroom. The observations took place before classes, during breaks, and during school lessons. During teaching time the observations generally were made from a chair at the back of the classroom. These have been described as basic conditions with regard to observing peer rejection processes as they unfold at school (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2014). The observer (the first author of the paper) took field notes, primarily regarding the peer rejection processes that he observed among classmates as well as among classmates and the teachers.

The observation method was complemented by unstructured interviews with the six teachers and one principal of the school, which were conducted by the first author and during which field notes were also taken. A variety of information about the school was obtained through the interviews. The eighth-grade class teacher was particularly helpful, as she became a key informant that provided valuable information about the students and their family backgrounds, school performance, their history and development from first to eighth-grade, friendship relationships, sympathies and antipathies, as well as the opinions about the school of all the actors of education. With this key informant, we were conscious of the risk of not taking on too much of her perspective (see Bryman, 2012).

Naturally, multiple sources were considered in analysing the information to avoid the risk of overrelying on a single key informant (Bryman, 2012). The researchers triangulated the information gathered from the class teacher with the information gained from other teachers, participant observations as well as the student essays.

The essays were elicited from fifteen students before the observations and interviews were conducted. These texts focused on the topic of “friendship among my classmates” and were implemented within the Slovak language lesson. All the essays were analysed with particular emphasis on the relationship to the girl Alexandra. The essays were written in Slovak. The translation into English was conducted and revised by the authors of this study, with the text also checked by a native English speaker who is fluent in Slovak. The essays were anonymous, with

each writer indicating his or her gender on the page as the only descriptor of social characteristics. The students were informed that their essays would be used for research purposes only. Students were asked to honestly write what they really thought about their class and their classmates. There was no limit to the length of the essay. Most students worked for one entire lesson on this text.

Ethical aspects of research

The procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of the first author's institution and followed the principles of anonymity, sincerity, credibility of information obtained, protection of confidential communication, compliance with obligations as well as non-misuse of findings. In order to protect the identities of the students, teachers, and schools involved in the research, all names and locations have been changed and coded. In the text we have assigned names only to the main actors. For more clarity, the other students remain unnamed. The subject of the research was clearly and truthfully described to the participants.

The project also followed the guidelines for human participant research valid in the Czech Republic and the EU, with participant protection closely monitored. After the end of the data collection, a debriefing was conducted at which teachers were provided with basic information about the bullying case, and they were provided with practical strategies on how to deal with bullying. This procedure followed the best practice research methods in which the ethical obligation to help victimized or potentially victimized students is described.

Analyses

All information was recorded in a field diary (Bartlett & Milligan, 2020; Punch et al., 2012), with the findings then transcribed sequentially into the computer. During the transcription process, emphasis was placed on research ethics, thus the name of the school as well as all teacher and student names were changed. The data has not been manipulated in any way. The information was then processed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) through a six-step thematic analysis procedure (see Braun & Clark, 2006). In order to organize, structure, and derive meaning from the collected data, information related to the research purpose was coded, also using thematic analysis (Adu, 2019; Braun & Clark, 2006). Hidden relationships, regularities, key themes, and characteristics of each topic were identified through the established codes. In the next step, the characteristics of the identified themes as well as relationships or connections among the characteristics were searched for and delineated (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The coding was conducted in the data record without the use of specialized software.

Thematic analysis was also seen as one form of induction in our research and in doing so we relied mainly on induction as implemented in thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). The inductive approach “provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings,” and “allow[s] research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006).

During the data analysis process, we also used data and methodology triangulation to address our research goal and to enhance the credibility of our study (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2014). We combined qualitative research methods (observation, interview, and essays) in a single case

study. The case was analysed from three partially overlapping and partially complementary perspectives: the perspective of the participant observer, the perspective of the teachers as well as the perspective of students themselves as captured in the student essays. With the help of triangulation, it was possible to see if the methods produced the same results or if there were clashing results (e.g. the Roma vs. non-Roma dichotomy was mentioned only by the teachers, not by the students).

FINDINGS

This section describes and explains peer rejection processes and bullying targeted at a 13-year-old girl, Alexandra, in her eighth grade, and features also the classroom context of peer relations in which the peer rejection and bullying developed. As a starting point, students' perceptions of classroom peer relations are presented, along with complementary perceptions of their class teacher. Then, Alexandra's positioning by others is introduced, specifically how classmates and teachers constructed Alexandra as having annoying personal characteristics and being a misfit to the group. These processes are complemented by Alexandra's own perception of the unfair and harmful positioning by others. It also describes how Alexandra was victimized and not defended. The final section focuses on her friendship with a Roma boy and constituting Alexandra as being on the bottom of the classroom.

The fragility of friendships over time

This section outlines perceptions of classroom peer relations context. It describes how students who attended this classroom viewed their classroom peer relations, and what their class teacher thought of the peer relations. The present study captured the classroom in a single time period of several months within the eighth-grade school year, during which the social processes observed and described by teachers and students seemed relatively stable. The essays, however, also pointed to marked changes in peer relations among classmates:

“The friendships are different every year. This year they changed so much that a few years ago you wouldn't have guessed who are friends today” (Boy X. Y. 9, 13 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

“Our class started together in 5th grade. We hardly made friends with each other at all, because new classmates were coming and we didn't understand them at all. It wasn't until we were 6th graders that we knew how to communicate with each other, even though I still didn't want to talk to anyone. We were just scared kids. The boys were usually running down the corridors. The girls were checking their schoolwork or just chatting about ordinary things. Every time someone came up to me, I would cry. By 7th grade, we were spending more time together than alone. The boys hadn't changed at all. But the girls changed a lot (...). I couldn't get along with some of the boys because I didn't really talk to them and they were preoccupied with the other boys. It's only now in 8th grade that I think I can communicate with them, but only when they don't have homework or if they need to know something” (Girl X. Y. 5, 14 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

The essays indicated that students themselves perceived friendships in the classroom as fluid and time-dependent. We may speculate that it is necessary to explore the development of peer relations over time because from the perspective of students, the dynamics of friendship markedly change within months and years. Moreover, the data showed that students thought of friendship formation as a complex task, as something that does not automatically come with entering a classroom, but needs to be gradually developed.

Sixteen children attended the eighth-grade—nine boys and seven girls. They were all 13 or 14 years old. All the students were Slovak except one boy who is ethnically Roma. The class was led by a teacher who had an office next to the classroom. During the data collection, it became clear that the class teacher was close to the students and tried to maintain friendly relationships with them. She gave us key insights into how the students' relationships developed over time and at one point described her classroom as “a fragile jug that can always break very easily and very quickly” (Teacher 1, a 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 2, 2019). In line with this perception, students perceived the teacher as someone who holds the ‘jug’ together. “When we argue or fight our great class teacher tries to patch up all relationships in our class” (Boy X. Y. 6, 14 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019). According to the students themselves, their class was “pretty bad-behaving” (Boy X. Y. 1, 13 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019), while at times it was described as “a good class, even if sometimes weird” (Boy X. Y. 7, 14 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

‘Annoying’: Positioning Alexandra as a misfit to the group and Alexandra’s own perception of the positioning

This section covers the social positioning of Alexandra. First, the positioning by others is introduced, and then, Alexandra’s own perception of the positioning is presented.

The main theme emerging was that Alexandra was perceived as a misfit to the group. This was especially apparent during the interviews with teachers where she was labelled as a troublemaker. Naturally, this label was not fixed and her position was not immutable, although it appeared so at first sight. The label ‘problematic’ was attached to her at her previous school, where she was given a lower behaviour mark for a petty theft. Nevertheless, at her current school she did not receive a lower behaviour mark and had no serious problems. On her report card she received B’s or C’s in most subjects, with only one D. In this respect, however, *she is different from her classmates, who are more likely to be A students* (Teacher 1, a 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 5, 2019). The teacher also indicated that she realized how difficult Alexandra’s position in the collective was: “Her classmates don’t accept her and she doesn’t accept them” (Teacher 1, a 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 5, 2019). The data suggested that Alexandra was labelled as a troublemaker and this labelling was one of the reasons how her low peer status was constructed (for more reasons, see section called “Hanging out with Gypsies”).

Next, Alexandra was often not included into classroom activities and groups because many of her classmates disliked her. Based on interviews with teachers, Alexandra did not go on school trips. In the classroom under observation, she sat at her desk in the back of the classroom and spent her breaks mostly alone. Alexandra also sat alone in the other classrooms, where the seating arrangements were not fixed and students were free to sit where they wish. Occasionally, Dominika stopped by Alexandra’s desk for a quick chat despite the fact that Dominika has been “forbidden” by the other girls to talk to Alexandra. “Ever since Alexandra first got here last year

they don't like her, but I don't know why. I don't see that she has done anything to them. You could say she doesn't have very many friends in our class other than me. Sometimes they all talk to her, which is nice, but sometimes they just gossip about her and it annoys me. Even my best friend doesn't like her – well, at the beginning of 7th grade she liked her a lot, but now she doesn't want me to hang out with her at all” (Dominika, 13 years old, grade 8). A complicated relationship was shown not only between Alexandra and the other girls but also with the boys, although the essays showed that not all boys reject Alexandra:

“Alexandra wasn't popular among the boys. Alexandra kept provoking and hurting the boys. But she wasn't always to blame. Sometimes the boys started provoking her” (Girl X. Y. 1, 13 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

“Alexandra still hasn't adapted and doesn't really want to. She sits in the back and has no one to talk to during breaks. She's so anti-social” (Boy X. Y. 2, age 14, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

“There's a girl I hate in this class. She is so disgusting and annoying, and she wants to ruin my friendship with my best friends” (Filip, 14 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

“Last year a girl came in who wasn't very good-looking. A little fat, weird clothes. The others don't like her very much, but I think she's pretty cool” (Boy X. Y. 3, 14 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

These examples show how other students perceived Alexandra as a misfit to the classroom group or students, namely someone who (unlike the group) had negative characteristics, did not belong to the group, did not adapt to the group norms, and importantly also someone who threatened and disrupted group functioning. We may speculate that these shared negative perceptions contributed to Alexandra being rejected and increased the differences between her own status among peers and the status of other classmates.

It was important to devote attention not only to how Alexandra being positioned by others, but her own perception of the positioning. For this reason in this part of the text we offer the full transcript of Alexandra's essay, which offers a rich picture of the way she perceives her position in the peer group.

Our class is weird. Sometimes we talk to each other, sometimes not. Someone is always fighting with someone else. I want us to get along as classmates, not pick on each other, call each other names or mock each other. I have only one true friend in the class, one girl I can tell anything and she always understands. But it is hard for her, too. Her BFF orders her not to talk to me, poor thing. When I was new here, they hated me. They still don't like me. I have been here for one year and I bother them. They push me away. I know I am strange to them. I don't know what they would do, if they were me. A new classmate came to the school after me and they got on with him immediately. I don't know what's so different about him that they liked him right away and pushed me away. One of my classmates here is very rude. I do not do anything to him, I only make a remark toward him from time to time and he immediately starts to call me names, hit me with his notebook or humiliates me. I

don't care about him. I even don't know him that well to be able to scold him. It also annoys me that my classmates judge the person only based on their looks, not based on what's inside their hearts. I want to get along with everyone, but they all have their own stuff going on. The first day I came here, I thought it was the best class ever. Then a classmate gossiped about me, which made the others think the worst about me. But I don't want to get back at her, because I still like her. I don't like when they laugh at me for being fat. It's not my fault I am like this. I don't need to be slim as they are and that's what bothers them about me. I am trying to get them to talk to me, but sometimes I can also be bad. I can be a cheeky rascal, too. I also provoke them. But I never judge people according to their looks, only based on what's in their hearts. I like my whole class, but they have already made up their minds about me and they don't want to change. I have my opinions too, but I change them every day based on their behavior. Still, they made up their mind about me when I came and will not change it. I don't do anything to them, but sometimes I just can't stay quiet (Alexandra, 13 years old, eighth-grade, essay, February 21, 2019).

Alexandra's essay provided deep insights into the first-hand experience of someone who was constantly marginalized in the peer group and often harmed by bullying. Most importantly, she described that it was difficult for her to fit in with her class (see Alexandra's essay: "I have been here for one year and I bother them. They push me away. I know I am strange to them"). This perspective of hers fitted with the situations first author observed in her classroom (see below). The main theme revealed in the essay the unfairness of her classmates' rejecting attitudes and bullying behaviours toward Alexandra. Alexandra felt treated differently than other members of the classroom and unfairly prejudged based on her looks as well as for reasons unknown to her, which made it impossible for her to change her own plight.

Passive responses of classmates and students

A significant theme related to the bullying incidents was how students and teachers responded to the incidents. The responses were identified from observations in the classroom and interviews with teachers. Over the period of our data collection, reactions to the bullying were passive. Bystanders overlooked and ignored the incidents and did not offer Alexandra help or emotional support. There was no official record of Alexandra being bullied at school and the school had not discussed the victimization with Alexandra and her parents, nor with the bullies and their parents. The incident described in the previous section and the interview with class teacher suggested that many students and even the class teacher knew about the bullying, but they ignored it. In this context, Dědková and Macháčková (2013, p. 57) pointed to the negative outcomes of ignoring bullying: "If bullying is silently tolerated [...] it becomes a socially acceptable form of behavior by which the aggressor improves and strengthens his or her own position." Thus, it is likely that the passive responses of students and teachers worsened the bullying.

Given the low status among peers that was shown, Alexandra was an easy target for her classmates. Students constructed Alexandra as different and annoying, as mentioned in the essay (cf. Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012; Mazzone et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2015a). Alexandra had no friends and no supporters. She remained on the edge of the student community. Aggressors were quite confident that they did not encounter strong resistance from this girl compared to other students, so attacks against Alexandra did not risk a counterattack or loss of prestige among others. It is

reasonable to assume that thanks to her low position among the others it might be easier for teachers and her classmates to justify attacks on Alexandra by claiming that Alexandra's situation is her own fault.

Victimization of Alexandra

Another important theme was Alexandra's repeated victimization. Observations of everyday interactions showed that classmates mocked Alexandra, mainly on social media. For example, they created and shared offensive digitally edited photos (e.g., a picture of Alexandra with her head replaced by a head of a pig, or a picture of Alexandra with her body replaced by an extremely obese body). In the following observation record, it is evident how Alexandra suffered from victimization by her classmates.

At the break, Cyprian shows his cell phone to four of his classmates.

Cyprian: Look.

The students stand up, walk around Cyprian and look at his phone together.

All the students suddenly burst out laughing.

Radovan looks at Alexandra and laughs.

Alexandra catches his look. She understands that it concerns her. She immediately got up and left the classroom with tears in her eyes [other classmates observed this situation and did nothing].

In response, Libor asks his classmates. Did she notice us?

Radovan: So what?

The break ends and Alexandra returns to class. She takes her cell phone out of her bag. I can't see what exactly she is doing on it, but I guess she is looking at social media for the reason that made the boys laugh (observation records from the field diary, April 4, 2019).

This was the most serious incident that was observed (and the researcher immediately informed the school staff about the incident). It showed the dynamics of the bullying incident initiated by a single student who was immediately joined and supported by several other classmates. The rest of the classmates only passively observed the incident and did not take the side of Alexandra even though it was clear that the behaviour is unfair and caused Alexandra harm. As a victim of traditional bullying and cyberbullying, Alexandra faced a range of negative immediate impacts, including anxiety, anger, fear, and helplessness. "Negative outcomes of victimization can deepen with the duration of the cyberbullying and distort the victim's self-esteem" (Dědková & Macháčková, 2013, p. 100).

"Hanging out with Gypsies": Constituting Alexandra as being on the bottom of the classroom hierarchy

The observations and interviews with teachers suggested that the low social status of Alexandra continued due to the low socioeconomic status of her family as well as her long-term friendship with a Roma boy. Based on the observations, Alexandra's closest relationship was with Mário, the only Roma student in the class. The Roma ethnicity was generally viewed as marginalized in the Slovakia, and Alexandra was white as are most of her classmates. These two students were united by the fact that they were the only students who were not in the class with the other students since the first grade, as they both later transferred to the school under study from other schools:

Mário transferred in the fifth grade, Alexandra in the seventh. In the Slovak school system, it was typical that students remain in the same class together from the first to ninth grades, and in this context their peer relations developed over the course of many years. These students also had in common the fact that they both sat in the back of the classroom. At first sight, it seemed that they both had a similarly low status among their peers. The eighth-grade teacher referred to this connection as “Alexandra is close to the Roma”, “girls don’t take her because she hangs out with Roma” (Teacher 1, a 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 5, 2019). In the students’ essays, however, no such perspective was indicated, although this does not mean that the students did not think along these lines, that is perhaps they were afraid to write something like that openly in the essays.

Although Mário, like Alexandra, was on the margins of the class, from an observer’s point of view it seemed that this is mainly due to one problem, namely that both often disrupted the class and disturbed their classmates. During the observation, the ways that Mário provoked the teacher were frequently observed. In the back of the classroom, he talked loudly and made fun of the lessons and discussions. This could be considered a representative example: *When the mathematics teacher asked a student on the blackboard how much the line AB measures, Mário shouted out “350 meters,” which was nowhere near the actual answer of 8.5 cm* (observation records from the field diary, April 9, 2019). Some teachers asked Mário to keep such exclamations to himself, while others just shook their heads in disbelief and sigh resignedly. Many students did not like his behaviour.

There were some differences between Mário and Alexandra that affected their position at the school. While Alexandra’s essay suggested that she felt that she had only one friend in the classroom, she was perceived as unpopular, and she was rejected by her classmates, Mário seemed to have experienced more friendships and popularity as well as lower levels of rejection. Based on the observation in the classroom, the most visible difference was that Alexandra had no one in the class who remained on her side or who comfort her when she was being excluded or bullied. In her own words, she had one good friend in the classroom and another classmate was even attempting to spoil this friendship.

Although Mário communicated with her, he did not consider her a close friend. Mário was considered the ‘class clown’ by his classmates, but he had one close friend and solid supporter in the class, Filip, whom he could rely on for everything. From an observer’s point of view, this made Mário’s position in the group much stronger and more secure, as Filip described: “I have a best friend here and we follow one thing: If your best friend has a problem, it is your problem too, so brother for brother” (Filip, 14 years old, eighth-grade). The two boys shared the same view of schooling, and both had very bad marks. “They don’t need school. They don’t care less – they think they’ve got it made” (Teacher 1, 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 1, 2019).

As one educator explained: “Filip’s mother did not want him to be friends with Roma, but she relented when she found out that this was a decent Roma” (Teacher 1, a 53-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 1, 2019). In the perceptions of local students and teachers, Roma people could be divided into two categories: “decent gypsies” and the “bad gypsies”. Some teachers started referring to Filip as a ‘Roma’, mainly because of his behaviour and the fact that he was very friendly with Mário. “He is becoming a Roma” (Teacher 2, 38-year-old teacher. Personal communication. Interview by the first author, April 10, 2019). Some teachers seemed to conceptualize the ‘Roma’ category more based on behaviour and friendships than ethnic background.

Compared to Alexandra, Mário’s social position in the classroom was also influenced by the positive relationship between the school and his family along with the high prestige of his father’s profession. His father was a respected pastor and the teacher enjoyed working with the

boy. In contrast, Alexandra's parents were not very active in communicating with the school and the teachers. In addition, Mário's popularity among his classmates seemed to be influenced by his good sports performance. His performance was valued in the boys' group. He was particularly successful in football and floorball. For example, in physical education class the eighth-grade played a floorball game against another class which Mário's team won 5–3, with four goals scored by the boy. In contrast, Alexandra was not perceived as athletically skilled and some of her classmates indicated that did not perceive her physical constitution favourably. Mário also experienced moments of glory in music class because he sang beautifully and the teacher pointed out his notable musical talent. Thus, compared to Alexandra, success in sports and music education improved his social position in the eyes of some teachers and classmates. This moved him from the lowest social status ahead of Alexandra in the hierarchical ranking of the eighth-grade indicated in the research results. From the students' perspective, these differences were important and had an impact on the peer rejection process.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has followed from recent calls for more in-depth perspectives on the peer rejection processes most proximal to bullying, including the perspectives of students themselves (Kousholt & Fisker, 2015; Lyng, 2018). Specifically, the research mapped the social dynamics interconnecting low peer status and bullying, which has been identified as a common problem among youth (Slonje et al., 2013; Smith, 2000). The present study reveals how the class peer environment shapes bullying. The main contribution of this article is a description of the student-constructed low peer status of a classmate and how this status (being rejected) fuels victimization by bullying.

We offer the perspective of Alexandra, the victim of bullying, who has shown poor educational achievement and is labelled as a troublemaker by those around her. In her essay, she explains how difficult it is to feel like she belongs in the class. We also offer a concrete description of how she is perceived by her classmates and how no one stands up for her, neither classmates nor teachers. Her classmates mainly mock her on social media. They create various offensive photo montages and share digitally edited photos with each other that are hurtful in nature. Alexandra's reactions to her victimization have been influenced by the fact that many students and teachers ignored the bullying. She is not succeeding in overcoming her position as a victim of bullying (Viala, 2015). She has not sought help from school authority nor is she fighting back against the aggressors (Aceves et al., 2010), who were quite confident that they would not encounter strong resistance from Alexandra. Alexandra's victim role in the class is also determined by the fact that she knows that her classmates perceive her as different (see Alexandra's essay: "I know I am strange to them") and as a person who does not fit in (cf. Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2015a; Thornberg et al., 2013).

The text also shows how some teachers ethnicize social relations in the classroom - see the view of some teachers that "Filip is becoming a Roma" and "Alexandra is close to the Roma." Our data suggest that some teachers may contribute to the stigmatization of students through their attitudes and communication (see Mazzone et al., 2018). Teachers can be seen as social referents in the judgement of peer status and they can play a prominent role in peer relationships, particularly in peer disliking (Hendrickx et al., 2017). The Roma vs. non-Roma dichotomy is mentioned only by the teachers, not by the students. If we want to seriously address bullying, we need to uncover the peer rejection processes leading up to and contributing to the bullying processes, including the various roles of teachers and other actors of education within the school environment (Kousholt & Fisker, 2015). Anti-bullying prevention and intervention efforts should include fostering accepting and fair relations among students (Peets et al., 2015).

The position of the Roma student to whom the bullied girl is relatively close is interesting, given that both of them were new to the class after transferring to the school from other schools. Nevertheless, there are differences between their situation which we describe in-depth, as they are socially interpreted by students as important in bullying interactions (see Thornberg, 2018). These differences also reveal factors that play a significant role in how friendships are established among students. The example of the Roma student also shows that it is not always clear whether a student is excluded or included. In practice, the situation is rarely so cut and dry. Situations of pure inclusion or pure exclusion can rarely be detected, as inclusion/exclusion flows back and forth in a liminal state. This is especially true among adolescents, who are undergoing physiological changes associated with their bodies reaching adulthood, with each student at a different stage of physical and emotional development. We agree with Ann Taket (2009, p. 13): “Rather than such a dualistic approach, exclusion should be seen as a continuum whereby individuals are positioned along a fluid continuum of absolute inclusion through to absolute exclusion, in terms of specific contexts.”

The study demonstrated how the construction a low peer status of a student increases the risk for long-term bullying of the student as well as contributes to justifications of bullying. The data document the suffering of the bullied and rejected student, who was well aware of her unfavourable situation. While the implications of these findings are worrisome, they also provide information with which to enhance the prevention and intervention efforts of the long-term cases of bullying, in which the interconnectedness of bullying and rejection is also often an important factor (Salmivalli, 2010). The results of our research are consistent with previous literature showing the importance of educating children on tolerance (Mazzone et al., 2018). Tolerance toward diversity allows children to form positive and equal peer relations, which in turn helps to form more favourable classroom contexts in which bullying is less likely (Balvin et al., 2020). Our findings also support the position that anti-bullying programs need not only to reduce the number of victimized students in the classrooms, but need to ensure that all students are safe in the classroom regardless of their peer status (Ansary, 2020). Overall, the study indicates that anti-bullying efforts should not only address bullying, but also systematically foster inclusivity and equity among students and minimize peer rejection.

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All authors agreed with the content of the manuscript and all gave explicit consent to submit it to the *Children & Society*. As well, they obtained consent from the responsible authorities at the institution where the work has been carried out, before the work was submitted.

DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and code will be made available on request.

ETHICS APPROVAL

The procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of the authors' institution and the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its amendments. The institutional board of the authors' institution approved the project. The authors declare that your manuscript is not published elsewhere.

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