

FAMILY–TEACHER PARTNERSHIP IN FOSTERING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN`S SOCIAL SKILLS USING THE BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMME “FREE FROM BULLYING” IN ESTONIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This research focused on the most important topics areas in parents` communication with the teachers and their assessments of the values prevailing in the classroom of second grade children using the programme “Free of Bullying”. The Free of Bullying methodology is fostering the development of children`s social skills, where family-teacher partnership plays essential role. The bullying prevention programme, initiated in the Kingdom of Denmark in 2007 and implemented in kindergartens in Estonia since 2010 and in schools since 2013. The main goal of the Free of Bullying methodology is to develop a behavioural culture that fosters respect toward oneself, fellow-pupils and adults, and works through mutual consideration.

Creating a trusting relationship with parents and attaching importance to their role in creating a safe classroom atmosphere is essential for preventing the situation where parents are integrated in this process only when painful and negative problem situations occur.

The current research sample consists of the parents of second grade children attending the “Free from bullying” pilot schools.

The research revealed that from the bullying prevention point of view parents highly appreciate care, tolerance and respect. The most frequent topics of parent-teacher discussion are joint activities of the class and bullying between children. Thus it appears that parents who have been more actively involved through the measures of “Bullying-free school” project more frequently discuss aspects of the social structure of classroom climate with the teacher.

Key words: social skills, bullying prevention, parental involvement, classroom climate.

Introduction

Many researchers have emphasized that it is essential to begin with bullying prevention as early as possible therefore the prevention has a crucial role in child care institutions and schools. There is strong evidence of the negative effect of bullying on a child`s mental and social health (Arseneault, Bowes & Shakoor 2009; Kõiv, 2006; Olweus, 2004; Wang & Ronald, 2012). Thus, the problem is actual and prevention of bullying should be addressed actively to achieve better results.

The objective of the methodology *Free of Bullying* is to develop positive social relations in kindergartens and schools that prevent bullying situations and place special emphasis on such

values as caring, respect, tolerance and courage. An important place belongs to cooperation with families. In Denmark the application of this methodology has proved very effective, which has been demonstrated by the studies conducted hand in hand with the implementation of the methodology. (Kamstrup Knudsen, Kampmann & Lehrmann, 2007; Kamstrup Knudsen, Erck, Lindberg & Kampmann, 2008)

In recent decades childhood studies have focused on the analysis and practical application of the involvement of children in the development of their social skills by mutual cooperation. There is a great deal of research that shows that many students do not feel physically and emotionally safe in schools. In schools without supportive norms, structures, and relationships, students are more likely to experience violence, peer-victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions (Astor, Guerra & Van Acker, 2010).

Research shows that parental involvement has a positive effect on children`s academic achievement as well as their social ability. Epstein outlines essential aspects that are in a positive correlation with the extent of parental involvement: academic success, compliance with school`s behaviour policy, learning motivation, better attendance, decrease in dropout rate, more positive attitude towards homework, parents` more positive assessment of teachers, improved interaction between children and parents, parents` more active participation in solving their children`s academic and behavioural problems in cooperation with school staff (Epstein, 2001, 2005). School`s cooperation with parents is important, because it supports the development of a more suitable environment for children and also shapes children`s personality, including their social skills (Lukk, 2008, p. 10, 26; Ruus, Veisson, Leino, Ots, Pallas, Sarv & Veisson, 2007). Albert Bandura created a theory of social learning where he emphasises peer influence in the process of socialization. Children learn their behaviour by observing peers, parents and teachers. They acquire both socially acceptable and unacceptable behavioural patterns via imitation (Bandura, 2001). Therefore, it is important that role models or people children respect and wish to imitate would set a good example.

If school and home are equal partners who evaluate children`s behaviour against the same requirements, a systematic approach and continuity are created, which lay foundation to the efficient development of social skills (Elias, 2006, p. 10; Kera, 2005, p. 54; Keltikangas-Järvinen, Mulla, 2016, p. 15-16). Close cooperation helps to spot problems on time and receive relevant feedback. Adults are responsible for what is going on in a children`s group, because they notice and set an example with their own behaviour.

In the Roskilde University in Denmark a study was conducted to ascertain the efficiency of the “Free of Bullying!” programme. The findings of their research revealed that classroom climate is greatly affected by the extent parents have embraced the programme (Rasmussen, PaludanBøgeskov & Mygind, 2013, p. 34). However, Estonian school culture is often characterised by little involvement of parents, including their little interest in things going on in school (Lukk, 2008, p. 6). Partly, it can be explained by the legacy of the Soviet era, where the primary responsibility for childrearing was given to school and kindergarten rather than parents (Kera, 2005, p. 54). Today parents` greater interest in things taking place in school can be observed, but it is often only a small circle of more active parents who communicate with the teacher, help to organise class events and participate in the development of the school as board members or guardians (Lukk, 2008, p. 23; Kera, 2005, p. 57). It has to be admitted that Estonian school needs changes in the school-home cooperation culture. To achieve this change, it needs to be dealt with from the first year of school onwards.

This research looks for answers to the following questions:

- What are the most important topics of teacher-parents discussions about the bullying prevention programme?
- How do parents assess the values prevailing in the classroom?
- To what extent has the methodology of the project “Bullying-free school” supported the development of children`s social skills that facilitate bullying prevention?

The Development of Children’s Social and Emotional Skills

The cornerstone of a supportive classroom climate that facilitates the development of each and every individual child is the acceptance of a child’s dignity by the teacher and fellow children. Efficient learning is directly linked to the respect shown to the learners and their perception of their own worth (Powell & Powell, 2016, pp. 43-45; Lucas, 2009, pp. 125-128). Since, among other things, the acquisition of social skills occurs via modelling (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011; Halliki, 2011; Saat, 2005, pp. 145-146; Bandura, 1971), the main responsibility for accepting children’s dignity lies on teachers and parents as children’s role models.

Contributing to the development of children’s social skills is important both in the short and long term. In the short term, the teaching of social skills leads to coping with such life skills as learning, socializing, efficient communication, noticing the needs of others and good relations with peers. As an outcome, learner’s academic performance improves, the classroom and school’s internal climate is enhanced, and the occurrence of problematic behaviour diminishes. In the long term, the teaching of social skills essentially contributes to children’s growing into educated, responsible, caring adults abstaining from violence and drugs (Elias, 2006, pp. 4-12). Social skills are also important for academic achievement. Several studies have shown that there is a clear link between social skills and performance at school (Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 196; Elias, 2006, p. 10; Elias, 2003, p. 21). For example, a study conducted in the United States with 2 793 children revealed that a common feature in school dropout risk group is the lack of social skills, which results in inability to communicate, including participation in group work (Chesebro, 1992 *via* Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 42).

In the broadest sense, social skills are viewed as a person’s ability to cope with others. This in turn means that the person is able to resolve situations creatively, flexibly and efficiently, without conflicting anyone, while remaining unobtrusive. Social skills help children to cope with their roles at school, in the family and in the wider society (Erelt, 2014; Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011, pp. 11-14; Elias, 2006, p. 4). In a narrower sense, it involves understanding peers and their feelings and views, empathy and sympathy, tact and social sensitivity (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011, p. 13). Elias (2006, p. 6) also includes emotional skills in the concept of social skills and lists the following four areas of social-emotional skills:

1. *Knowledge about oneself and others.* This includes recognizing and verbalizing one’s feelings, ethical and safe behaviour in relationships and recognizing and verbalizing one’s strengths.
2. *Making responsible decisions.* This includes self-control, adequate assessment of situations, ability to set short- and long-term objectives and achieve them while solving problems creatively and responsibly.
3. *Consideration for others,* which means understanding others’ thoughts and feelings, respectful attitude towards peers and appreciating differences within a group.
4. *Ability to behave.* This area is understood by Elias as an efficient communication (incl. the ability to express oneself clearly), creating and maintaining healthy relationships, ability to fairly resolve conflicts, ability to sidestep provocations (to stick to one’s decisions without letting oneself be drawn into unethical, unsafe and unwanted activities), ability and courage to seek help (incl. recognize the need to seek help) and to behave ethically, in compliance with the decisions and behaviour consistent with societal norms of morality.

Children’s ability to acquire social skills is to some extent dependent on the level of their innate sociability. Sociable children are curious and courageous communicators, which provides them with a host of positive communication experience, which in turn leads to better social skills (Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 43). Although shy children have less communication experience, they can acquire good social skills when these are consciously developed (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011, pp. 24-25). At the same time, if children develop communication

anxiety, they also experience problems with performance at school. Children who suffer from communication anxiety are not able to answer in front of others in the lesson and they have fewer friends. They do not ask for help when they do not understand a task (Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 41). Among other reasons (heredity, imitation, reinforcement) communication anxiety is also indicative of shortcomings in the development of social skills. Such skills as the relevant use of language, understanding and communicating nonverbal cues may be difficult for a less sociable child. In the absence of these skills, positive feedback yielded by communication is smaller and this makes the children withdraw into their shell even more (Powell & Powell, 2016, pp. 43-44). Thus, it is especially important to consciously deal with the development of social-emotional skills of naturally less sociable children at school.

Social skills are also related to emotional intelligence, which reflects a person’s ability to notice their own and others’ emotions and cope with them. Namely, the way a person manages their emotions affects their academic results as well as social relations in the classroom (Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 27). One way to teach children to manage this process is naming emotions. This occurs in the participation in the process of child’s socialization of teachers and parents, who in specific situations verbalize the particular emotion to the child. This how the emotions children are experiencing is explained and verbalized to them influences their emotion management (Bandura, 2003). Secondly, social skills are learned from parents and other adults by modelling (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011, p. 125; Saat, 2005, pp. 145-146; Bandura, 1971). Therefore, it is important for the adults communicating with children (parents at home, teachers at school) to actually be positive role models for children rather than only mediate the desired patterns of behaviour and related values verbally (Kera, 2005, p. 80; Rasmussen et al., 2013, pp. 24-26 Saat, 2005, pp. 145-146).

In the acquisition of social skills continuity is essential. If social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not become a lifelong behavioural pattern (Elias & Schwab, 2011, p. 338; Kera, 2005, p. 79; Keltikangas-Järvinen, Mullola, 2016, p. 19). If schools continually focus on the development of children’s social and emotional skills, pupils’ academic results rise, problematic behaviour decreases and classroom climate improves. Supporting the development of pupils’ social and emotional skills is as important as focusing on their academic ability. Often attention is paid to academic achievement, disregarding the social character of learning process and the role of social-emotional skills in it (Powell & Powell, 2016, p. 43; Elias, 2006, p. 5).

If school and home are equal partners who evaluate children’s behaviour against the same requirements, a systematic approach and continuity are created, which lay foundation to the efficient development of social skills (Elias, 2006, p. 10; Kera, 2005, p. 54; Keltikangas-Järvinen, Mullola, 2016, p. 15-16). Close cooperation helps to spot problems on time and receive relevant feedback. Adults are responsible for what is going on in a children’s group, because they notice and set an example with their own behaviour. Parents’ positive attitude towards child’s classmates and their parents is transmitted to children and leads to positive changes in the mutual relationships in the classroom (Rasmussen et al., 2013, pp. 33-34).

Methodology of Research

Sample and Research Procedure

The pilot project involved 25 schools all over Estonia, but in this research sample consisted of the parents of second grade children from Tallinn schools (8 schools). All in all, 219 parents participated in research, included 32% of all the schools that had joined the pilot project. In the spring of 2015, a questionnaire was carried out. Anonymous questionnaires were supplied with a code, which allowed us to link the responses of parents of the same class while analysing the data. Parents’ questionnaires were taken home by children and returned completed within a week.

The Selection of Methods and Rationale

In the process of the pilot study, a questionnaire utilising a Likert-type 5-point scale was employed to collect assessments of the importance of the problem of bullying, an important aspect of classroom climate from parents of the schools that had joined the "Bullying-free school" programme. The data were analysed by means of the statistical data analysis programme *SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for Windows*. Parents' data were analysed mainly through frequency tables and frequency diagrams. In addition, the Pearson's correlation coefficient was used, where $r > 0.3$ i.e. there is at least a weak correlation.

Results of Research

The Most Important Topic Areas in Communication with the Teacher

Parents were asked to mark the topics they consider most important while communicating with the teacher and how often they discuss these topics with the teacher.

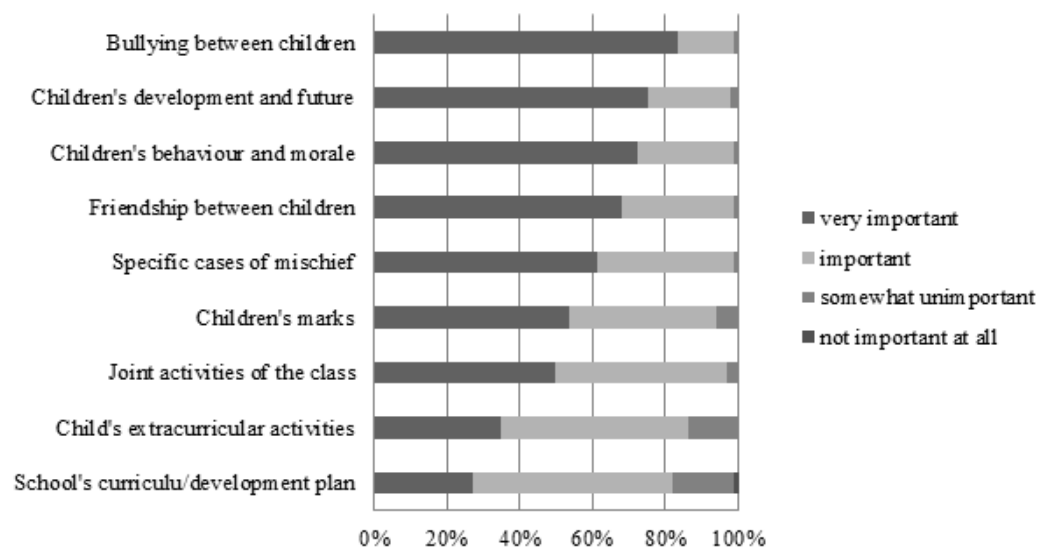


Figure 1: Topics of teacher-parent discussions and their importance according to parents' assessments.

The most frequent topics of parent-teacher discussions are joint activities of the class and bullying between children. At the same time, almost all topics listed in the questionnaire were considered important or very important (see Figure 1). Only school's development plan and curriculum received the assessment 'not important at all' (by two respondents) and also the lowest average rating in the importance of topics ($M=3.0$). The topic concerning the school's development plan and curriculum is the least frequently marked parent-teacher discussion topic in the questionnaire (28% of the respondents have never discussed it with the teacher).

There was a weak statistically significant correlation between the number of measures used and the frequency of parent-teacher discussion of the topics *friendships between children* and *bullying between children* ($r=0.26$). Thus it appears that parents who have been more actively involved through the measures of "Bullying-free school" project more frequently discuss aspects of the social structure of classroom climate with the teacher. The same is confirmed by a negative correlation between poorly managed school-home cooperation and the frequency of discussing bullying between children ($r=-0.23$).

Parents’ Assessments of the Values Prevailing in the Classroom

Values that form the basis of the development of thinking patterns and determine the social structure of the class represent one of the cornerstones of classroom atmosphere. According to this study, parents think that in their child’s class most value is attached to good relations and helpfulness/consideration, next to politeness followed by tolerance and respect, thereafter learners’ safety and joy of school and the lowest position belongs to academic achievement and courage. Values influence behavioural patterns, which is confirmed by the average-strong correlation between certain values and behavioural patterns characterizing a positive classroom climate found by using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. Different values on classroom atmosphere has a varying scope. Academic achievement as a value has the weakest influence on class as a social structure. At the same time, attaching value to respect, tolerance, consideration, politeness and joy of school leads to a class collective where pupils respect each other and nobody is excluded from games or teased (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between values and behaviour.

Values	Behaviours characterizing a positive classroom climate				
	Nobody is teased	Children respect each other	Nobody is excluded from games	Children go to each other’s birthdays	Children have courage to stand up for the weaker ones
Safety	0.27	0.32	0.3	0.13	0.27
Academic achievement	0.23	0.2	0.19	0.09	0.25
Good relations	0.3	0.34	0.3	0.13	0.26
Respect	0.28	0.33	0.32	0.15	0.26
Tolerance	0.32	0.38	0.32	0.16	0.27
Helpfulness, consideration	0.29	0.34	0.27	0.16	0.27
Courage	0.2	0.21	0.3	0.06	0.28
Politeness	0.3	0.35	0.27	0.2	0.28
Joy of school	0.26	0.33	0.28	0.14	0.31

**If Pearson’s correlation coefficient is $0.3 < r < 0.7$, it is a statistically average correlation.*

The outcome of the parents’ survey also confirmed a correlation between different aspects of a positive school climate. According to Pearson’s correlation coefficient, there is an average-strong correlation ($r > 0.4$) between the following behavioural patterns reflecting good relations between children: *children do not tease each other, children respect each other, children have courage to stand up for weaker ones, nobody is excluded from games, children go to each other’s birthdays*. However, it needs to be noted that the correlation between the listed patterns of behaviour and the statement *the teacher helps to solve problems between children* was weak ($0.05 < r < 0.22$), while correlation with the statement *the teacher notices problems between children* was stronger ($0.22 < r < 0.48$). Thus, to achieve a positive school climate, it is important for the teacher to notice problems between children, but let children themselves solve these problems. However, here a significant role belongs to children’s social skills: whether and how they are able to solve the problem situations arising between themselves and their peers.

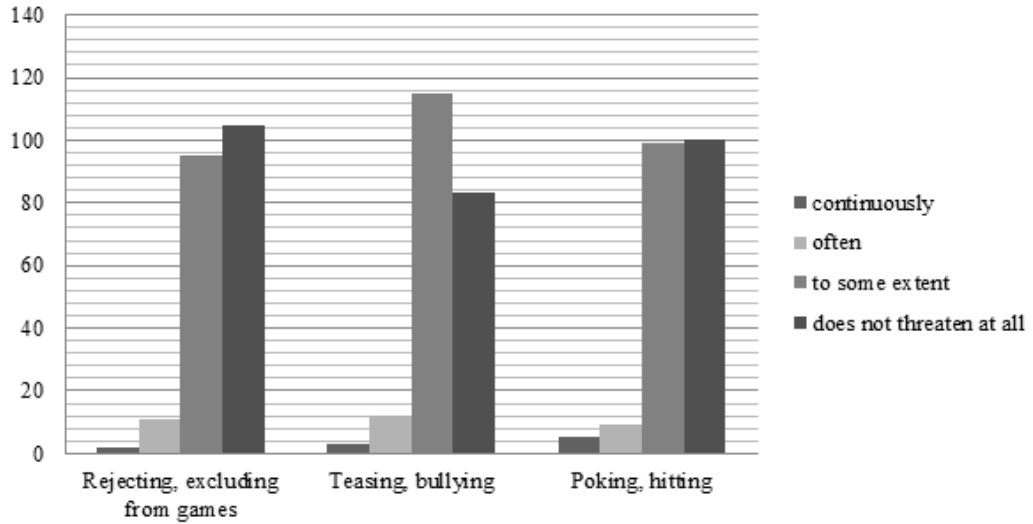


Figure 2: Forms of bullying that according to parents threaten their children at school.

According to 216 parents, only few children suffer from continuous bullying at school (N=5), but to some extent rejecting (N=95), teasing (N=115) and poking/hitting (N=99) threatens about half of the pupils (Figure 2). The situation where fewer than half (M=45%) of the children can feel completely safe at school gives a signal that more needs to be contributed to the creation of a safe classroom climate while involving all parties of a learning classroom.

Discussion

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of parental involvement (Elias, 2006; Epstein, 2005; Lukk, 2008; Powell & Powell, 2016; Rasmussen, et al., 2012) and the need for varying the methods of involvement (Lukk, 2008). The “Free from Bullying!” methodology offers a wealth of different options for involving parents. Although in the theoretical part it was admitted that the weakest link of the learning classroom is a parent, because cooperation between the teacher (school) and parents (home) is insufficient, the findings of our research suggest that some changes can already be observed in the school-home cooperation paradigm. It is noticeable that in the classes implementing the “Free from Bullying!” methods, moral values are considered important, while the previous research findings in Estonia revealed that 1.8% of the parents are of an opinion that parents should have no say in school matters, in our study not a single parent gave this response (Ruus et al, 2007). Therefore, it can be concluded that compared to the 2007 study, parents’ willingness to be involved in school matters has increased, while the wish to participate in school life is not necessarily related to the application of the measures for parental involvement of the pilot project “Bullying-free school”.

Another important aspect of a classroom climate is the feeling of belonging. According to the parents’ assessments, in the schools of Tallinn that have joined the “Bullying-free school” pilot project children perceive that they belong to their school and they have good friends there. However, almost half of the parents admit that their child is threatened by bullying behaviour at school.

Since the findings of the current research coincide with the findings of the Danish study, it can be concluded that parental involvement is still one of the weaknesses of the “Free from bullying!” programme and the initiators of the project should possibly think this through once

again. Maybe, in addition to teachers' project-related training it would be helpful to also conduct training sessions for parents.

The main development area today lies in the consistency of the application of the methodology and substantive involvement of parent. Free of Bullying is an effective program when its implementation is integrated into daily life. To allow parents to contribute to bullying prevention with increased awareness, it is important to ensure that they are continuously informed and involved in positive values-based activities in many different ways.

According to the parents, information about the implementation of Free of Bullying reaches homes mainly through children who share their impressions about relevant activities at school. This in itself is a gratifying result, which shows that children are excited about the methodology and share their excitement with their parents. Like in Estonia, in Denmark also the project related information mainly reached homes through children's impressions (Kamstrup Knudsen, et al., 2007).

Cooperation between school and home has a vital role in the implementation of Free of Bullying, which is why it is important for the teachers to continuously involve parents in information exchange about the methodological activities of Free of Bullying and their objectives. To develop a common understanding of communication culture and values essential for bullying prevention, it is important to not just inform but also discuss different situations with parents. In addition, the positive and cooperative attitude of the majority of parents creates a favourable platform for the implementation of the methodology.

Current research revealed that from the bullying prevention point of view parents highly appreciate care, tolerance and respect. Thus, we saw that the values on which Free of Bullying focuses coincide with the teachers and parents' opinion of what is important in creating and maintaining a positive social atmosphere.

Conclusions

The methodology of the "Free from Bullying!" programme offers various options for improving cooperation between school and home and their active application enhances cooperation at both classroom and school level. Research revealed that the development of social skills has a potential on the formation of a positive classroom climate.

Based on the findings of the research it can be concluded that school-home cooperation has become closer in several classes due to the pilot project "Bullying-free school". When parents are involved, their participation also increases and they experience fewer impediments to their communication with the teacher.

Cooperation between school and home has a vital role in the implementation of Free of Bullying, which is why it is important for the teachers to continuously involve parents in information exchange about the methodological activities of Free of Bullying and their objectives. Although it is not possible for the teachers to take full responsibility for the families' support, being the managers of the process, they are able to influence parents' participation to a considerable extent. To develop a common understanding of communication culture and values essential for bullying prevention, it is important to not just inform but also discuss different situations with parents.

To sum up, it could be said that parents highly appreciate the teachers' ability to maintain a positive atmosphere, to caringly guide children and intervene in injustice. Free of Bullying is aimed at promoting an empathic culture of communication which is based on children's needs and serves as a practical tool for introducing values and social norms. Thus, it can be said that the programme "Free from Bullying!" is suited to the improvement of school-home cooperation culture in Estonia.

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