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## Peer mediation and bullying at school

### Mediacje rówieśnicze i zastraszanie w szkole

#### Abstract

**Aim.** The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the positives of peer mediation in addressing school bullying, and to highlight its strengths within the spectrum of prevention and intervention methods within this issue.

**Methods.** Using the method of critical analysis, we processed scientific outputs (studies, monographs), and existing research findings with the intention to compare the so far identified and described aspects of peer mediation, and to put them in context of the needs and possibilities of the school environment in solving the problem of bullying. The text has the character of a review study.

**Results.** The analysis showed that peer mediation has great potential in the prevention and intervention of bullying in the school environment: in a narrower sense, it can be beneficial in strengthening the resilience and defence of potential victims, as well as the empathy and compassion of potential aggressors; in a broader sense, it can be useful in shaping a healthy and friendly classroom and school climate.

**Conclusion.** One of the relevant tasks of the school is to create a supportive environment for the development of the child's personality and appropriate working conditions for all actors of the educational process (Kraus, 2008; Smith, Pepler & Rigby, 2004). Nevertheless, school is often an environment of tension, conflict, and a source of psychological trauma for children, parents, and teachers (Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hanish et al., 2004; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Poněšický, 2005; Thornberg, 2011). In particular, we see the

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potential of peer mediation in the school setting in strengthening the resilience of victims and promoting positive changes in the behaviour and actions of peers.

**Originality.** The results of the study are not innovative, but they bring a different point of view on solving the problem of bullying in school (highlighting the positives of a non-directive peer approach); the ambition of the study was to compare the existing pedagogical, psychological, and sociological backgrounds, to identify new relationships and contexts, and to enrich them with their own knowledge in the work with children in the prevention of bullying in school.

**Keywords:** school violence, power, victims and perpetrators of bullying, peer mediation, prevention, intervention, resilience

### **Abstrakt**

**Cel.** Celem badania jest identyfikacja i analiza pozytywnych stron mediacji rówieśniczej w zwalczaniu *bullyingu* szkolnego oraz podkreślenie jej mocnych stron w zakresie metod profilaktyki oraz interwencji.

**Metody.** Metodą krytycznej analizy opracowano wyniki naukowe (badania, monografie) oraz istniejące wyniki badań z zamiarem porównania dotychczas zidentyfikowanych i opisanych aspektów mediacji rówieśniczej, a także umieszczenia ich w kontekście potrzeb i możliwości środowiska szkolnego w rozwiązywaniu problemu *bullyingu*. Tekst ma charakter pracy przeglądowej.

**Wyniki.** Analiza ogromny potencjał mediacji w prewencji i interwencji *bullyingu* w środowisku szkolnym. W węższym znaczeniu, może być korzystna we wzmacnianiu odporności i obronności potencjalnych ofiar, a także empatii i współczucia potencjalnych agresorów. W szerszym sensie natomiast, może być przydatna w kształtowaniu zdrowego i przyjaznego klimatu w klasie i szkole.

**Wnioski.** Jednym z istotnych zadań szkoły jest stworzenie środowiska wspierającego rozwój osobowości dziecka, a także stworzenie odpowiednich warunków pracy dla wszystkich uczestników procesu edukacyjnego (Kraus, 2008; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). Niemniej jednak szkoła jest często środowiskiem napięć, konfliktów i źródłem psychologicznej traumy dla dzieci, rodziców i nauczycieli (Fox, Boulton, 2006; Harnish i in., 2004; Hymel, Swearer, 2015; Poněšický, 2005; Thornberg, 2011). Dostrzeżono szczególnie potencjał mediacji rówieśniczych w środowisku szkolnym w obszarze wzmacniania odporności ofiar oraz promowaniu pozytywnych zmian w zachowaniu rówieśników.

**Oryginalność.** Wyniki badania nie są nowatorskie, ale ukazują inny punkt widzenia w zakresie rozwiązywania problemu *bullyingu* w szkole (podkreślenie pozytywów niedyrektywnego podejścia rówieśniczego). Ambicją badania było porównanie istniejących środowisk pedagogicznych, psychologicznych oraz socjologicznych, identyfikacja nowych relacji i kontekstów oraz wzbogacenie ich o własną wiedzę z zakresu pracy z dziećmi w profilaktyce *bullyingu* w szkole.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przemoc szkolna, władza, ofiary i sprawcy mobbingu, mediacja rówieśnicza, prewencja, interwencja, resilience

## Introduction

The attention a society pays to the prevention of negative social phenomena is its calling card. It is more rational to prevent negative social phenomena than to deal with them afterwards; it is a matter of the efficient use of energy, time, and money (the material aspect), but above all, it is a matter of taking care of human resources (the non-material aspect). This is particularly true in the case of violence occurring in the educational environment of a school; it is an environment that is meant to educate, not to traumatise.

In addition to the persistently high levels of bullying among primary and secondary school pupils (*Správa o stave a úrovni výchovy a vzdelávania v školách a školských zariadeniach v Slovenskej republike v školskom roku 2020/2021*, 2021), bullying of teachers by pupils or parents, but also by principals and colleagues against each other, is a growing phenomenon (Bricheno & Thornton, 2016; Galton & Macbeath, 2008). We believe that this phenomenon is related, among other things, to changes in the attractiveness of the teaching profession and the authority of teachers in relation to children, parents and the public in recent decades, but this is a topic that requires separate attention. The present text focuses briefly on the nature of bullying in schools. The aim is to analyse the possibilities that peer mediation can provide in this situation for all actors in the school environment.

## School violence and power

The problem of violence is the problem of abuse of power. The diagnosis of the personality of the perpetrator may be variable: the perpetrator may be an individual endowed with a greater degree of self-confidence, talent, characteristics of various kinds (intellect, skills, appearance, communication, charisma, etc.), who is driven by a sense of superiority to self-assertion; or, conversely, an individual compensating for low social status, competence, or frustration caused by life situations. A child who grows up in an unsupportive upbringing environment (callous, manipulative, gender stereotyped) is mostly subjected to a one-sided experience of aggression and violence. They see the world as a space in which one lives at the expense of another and there is no such things as reciprocity, trust, empathy, and respect (Poněšický, 2005). Achieving power through conditioning is a common practice of many parents' parenting styles. In the case of immature individuals, power actions often elicit reflexive reactions of submission (called escape). This fact is easily exploited by individuals intent on manipulating, shaping to their expectations, and disorienting, which are the hallmarks of mobbing to psychoterror.

However, power cannot be seen as exclusively negative; power is distributed in every group in some way and its presence does not necessarily imply a negative development in interpersonal relations. In an interpersonal framework, it is neither positive nor negative. It is a natural part of every social group and its distribution by default takes place through competition for power (Labáth, 2020). The desire for power gradually begins to take shape as early as preschool age; and although personality predispositions play a role, these traits in themselves do not, for the most part, lead to immediate aggression. The upbringing style in the family (*e.g.* emotionally cold, demeaning, indifferent, passive, or hateful) and previous experiences and experiences often play an important role (Škoviera, 2011). Power behaviours are the result of social learning that takes place in all educational settings (family, school, community, society) and are not necessarily negative in nature; power behaviours can be shaped in the educational environment through respect, tolerance, and empathy (Keltner, 2016; Labáth, 2020).

Violence is considered a natural dimension of human existence that elicits a specific response. The problem is the mundanity of violence, its “objectification” and indifferent attitude to its manifestations. Long-term violence against children and adolescents takes place in an environment in which necessary and expected caring relationships have been disrupted. The actors themselves speak of the typical symptoms of totalitarian domination, with intense and escalating violence and death threats, the enforcement of banal rules, the occasional appearance of rewards that add to the absurdity of the situation, and the destruction of relationships as a consequence of isolation and shame.

Most paralyzing is the unpredictability of violence and the fact that the perpetrators of violence are people to whom the children have an emotional relationship. This makes them even more attached to the violent person, and these attachments are at the expense of their own well-being, identity, or even their own lives (Hermann, 2001).

Children and adolescents find it difficult to cope with any violence perpetrated against them. Very rarely do they confide in another; the perpetrator’s threats and feelings of self-blame play an important role. In their environment, they often face distrust, suspicion, and accusations of lying. Existing research shows that a child has to turn to up to seven adults in his or her environment before anyone will believe him or her (Hermann, 2001). The existential plane of an abused child’s life is complicated. Feelings of hope and meaningfulness are confronted daily with absolute despair, underpinned by a loss of trust in parents and loved ones, and a search for answers to the question “Why is this happening to me?”. Moreover, there is an ever-present sense of guilt that absolves the real culprits in the eyes of the child of responsibility for the violence. The abused child often seeks satisfaction in the idea

that the violence did not happen, his wish is to hide the violence from the world and himself.

Research has confirmed the link between the severity of childhood maltreatment and the experience of dissociative states. According to Judith L. Hermann (2001, p. 145) “most persons who experienced childhood abuse report that they helped themselves by inducing a trance, some of whom developed an outright dissociative virtuosity.”

Violence in the school environment is associated with extremely traumatic experiences that paralyse the individual and restrict them from experiencing a free existence. Children and adolescents affected by this phenomenon miss out on the joy of growing up, ceasing to be spontaneous in an age-appropriate way. They are unhappy, fearful and live in permanent stress (Elliotová, 2002). The pressure of the collective forces boys to behave the way men are expected to behave; to be tough enough, to not be afraid of a punch and to know how to give it (Říčan, 2013). But it is not only boys who bully children; girls are statistically no less represented, but social and psychological forms are more prevalent than physical forms (Cook et al., 2010; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; *Prevenia a riešenie šikanovania a kyberšikanovania žiakov v dokumentoch základných škôl. Výskumná správa - Slovenské stredisko pre ľudské práva*, 2018). Other research has also identified a preference for overt physical aggression in boys and a tendency towards relational aggression in girls (exclusion from the collective, slander, name-calling, etc.) (Adamík-Šimegová, 2012); many researches show that boys are more involved in physical or verbal bullying, girls are more involved in relational bullying and cyberbullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2010; Xu, Ren, Li, & Wang, 2020). The typical traits of an aggressor are the desire for power; to dominate, to control others, to assert oneself ruthlessly, and to demand blind obedience. The aforementioned traits are characteristic of classroom bullying, where the leader/aggressor forms the core, surrounded by a group of supporters (initially neutral classmates, emboldened by the aggressor’s “success”).

As part of researching the prevalence of bullying at school, it is also important to take into account factors such as age, gender, religion, cultural or social context. For example, boys report more bullying than girls, but girls report more victimization (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Peer bullying is becomes visible as early as pre-school, it peaks during the middle school years and declines somewhat by the end of high school (Currie et al., 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). There also appear to be significant differences between countries. In a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Currie et al., 2012), examining bullying and victimization among 10 -, 13 -, and 15 - year - olds in 43 countries, rates of victimization varied from 2 % to 32 % across countries and rates of bullying varied from 1 % to 36 %. It seems that the incidence of bullying has increased over the last decades, only the

conditions, methods, and sources of implementation have changed. For example, in the United States, youth reports of physical bullying declined from 22% in 2003 to 15 % in 2008 (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010), but online harassment increased from 6 % in 2000 to 11 % in 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). Traditional forms of bullying were replaced by cyberbullying because of access to technology becoming more ubiquitous. An unforgettable fact is the stability of victimization. Peer victimization is often characterized as a rather stable experience “once a victim, always a victim” (Hymel & Swearer, 2015, p. 295). The same authors wrote that across the longest interval examined to date, Andre Sourander, Leila Helstelä, Hans Helenius and Jorma Piha (2000) found that 12 % of boys and 6 % of girls were consistently bullied from age 8 to 16.

There is now no shortage of methods of working to prevent and intervene against bullying in schools, many of which build on common pillars. First and foremost is positive relationships with adults; positive relationships between teachers and students may enhance the likelihood of student reporting (Oliver, Candappa, 2007), but with age students’ willingness to report bullying declines (Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Another important pillar is teachers’ collaboration with parents and willingness to isolate aggressors from victims; Khaerannisa Cortes and Becky Kochenderfer-Ladd (2014) found that students were more likely to report bullying when they believed that teachers would respond responsively by involving parents and/or separating the students involved; and less likely to report when they expected teachers to punish the perpetrator, presumably for fear of retaliation or ridicule (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). It should be said, research has also shown, that many bullies are socially intelligent (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 2000) and enjoy considerable status in the peer group (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003), leading to distinctions between socially marginalized and socially integrated bullies (Farmer et al., 2010). If bullying is viewed as a reflection of power and status in the peer group, it is difficult to convince students to abandon such behaviour (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

An important factor in the success and effectiveness of the methodological practices used is that the relationship between educators and students should be open, friendly, fair, and trustworthy. If favourable relationships between teachers and pupils are fostered in a school, bullying mostly does not stand a chance in such a collective. Even if there is a situation that could escalate, its resolution has a higher success rate in a healthy and open environment. However, as already indicated, it is also important to foster healthy relationships between teaching staff and each other. Their mutual approach, preferred communication style, non-conflicting way of solving problems, respect for colleagues’ opinions and attitudes are crucial in the process of educational influence. These are the basic pillars preferred by the

mediation process, and which we consider beneficial in the context of educational role models.

### **School bullying prevention and peer mediation**

The prevention of socially pathological phenomena plays a crucial role in the school environment. In school, it is mainly primary prevention, whose target group is the entire school population. It can be implemented within the framework of specific prevention (implementation of prevention with a specific focus, *e.g.* prevention of substance abuse, bullying, violence, risky sexual behaviour, use of alcoholic beverages, etc.) or non-specific prevention; it is about the overall formation of personality towards a healthy lifestyle so that a mature personality is able to withstand a variety of negative influences (Kraus, 2008). In the portfolio of non-specific prevention of bullying in school we include all factors of the school environment that directly or indirectly influence the educational formation of the personality of pupils and students; first of all, we mean the atmosphere in the working environment of the school, the state of interpersonal relations between school employees, the prevailing communication style between the actors of the educational process in the school, the observance of democratic principles in the management and organization of the school, etc. These are the factors whose correlations are the subject of investigation by the author of this study in the ongoing research in Slovak schools.

Prevention programmes with a specific objective depend on the choice of the specific socio-pathological phenomenon that the programme is intended to prevent and the target group of beneficiaries. In Slovakia, school prevention programmes are mainly implemented by school psychologists or even committed teachers, but they often unqualifiedly substitute the role of the social pedagogue, which is absent in school work structures despite years of professional discussions. Many years of experience have shown that it is preferable to leave their implementation to trained volunteers (students of humanities), who in their free time can enrich their own theoretical knowledge with valuable experience, make effective use of their time alongside their studies, and develop their social competences. At the same time, given their age and the smaller generation gap, they have the chance to gain the interest and trust of, in particular, adolescent young people more quickly and to start a more intensive debate on the issue. This was also the experience of the prevention programme on violence and bullying that we worked with; initiated by the Crisis Centre for Victims of Violence; the programme was created as a response to the ever-increasing level of aggressive and violent behaviour and actions in the educational environment, primarily in the family and at school. The program has been im-

plemented in elementary schools through volunteers for over 6 years. The content of the prevention consisted of a number of essential ideas, mainly based on the need to eliminate the so-called myths about violence and stereotypes. These myths, typical of traditional upbringing, cause children and adolescents to become risk-takers in relation to aggression and violence in their everyday environment. The prevention programme has been designed to:

- draw attention to situations that do not at first sight look like violence;
- draw attention to prejudices that lead to violent behaviour and actions;
- teach children to anticipate and avoid violence;
- teach children to assess situations correctly and to protect themselves/friends;
- teach children tolerance and belonging, friendly interpersonal relations;
- prepare children for using the right ways of dealing with situations;
- teach children to say “no.”

A prevention programme designed in this way has many positives, but also some negatives; in particular the presence of an alien element in the collective of children or an unequal relationship between the preventionist and the beneficiaries. If specific prevention programmes are properly set up (objectives, target group, methods), there is no doubt as to their usefulness. However, in our view, it is now increasingly important to focus on non-specific preventive effects, *i.e.* comprehensive, whole-person formation of tolerance, respect and, relationships, in the field of bullying. Peer mediation, among other things, offers such an approach. The advantage is that prevention is a natural process of strengthening relationships in a normal group or collective setting; there is no need to create a programme for a specific target group or to find implementers. Given that one of the tasks of prevention is school monitoring and deprivation, it is not appropriate for prevention to further victimise potential victims, and undermine the psychological integrity of children and young people, etc. Peer mediation can eliminate the process of preventing aggressive conflicts. We are convinced that the peer approach in school can have a strong preventive potential (not only) in the issue of bullying. Implementing the principles of peer mediation in the whole school space helps to create a friendly, trusting atmosphere between all actors and thus protect children and adolescents from any form of social pathology.

The main factors for the emergence of conflict in the school environment are primarily the character traits of the disputants, different value systems, different social environments, persistent stress, long-term frustration, as well as the presence of “spectators” in the conflict or their insensitive insertion into the topic (Bielešová, 2012; Saroyan, 2021). Peer mediation can manage all of these factors in the process of an equal mediation relationship between three persons (disputants and facilitator).

The use of peer mediation helps to sensitise the whole school community to any manifestations of aggression, violence, and injustice. Learning non-confrontational communication, empathy, respect, and tolerance, as well as ways of constructive negotiation in pupils and students, helps to form more trusting relationships, interactive communication, and cooperation in the school classroom environment. This contributes to the prevention of conflicts, aggression, and violence; with spill-over into the teaching team. Through the principles of mediation, the need to develop social competences, solidarity, and belonging is promoted among the participants in the educational process, which is a welcome activity in the current pandemic situation. Similar conclusions have been reached by several studies and research that have investigated peer interactions between peers, their impact on the development and resolution of different school situations. Peer interactions appear to strongly influence children's and young people's ability to (self) regulate; even simple contact with a peer has the potential to alter decisions, influence risk-taking behaviour, and increase sensitivity to sanctions and rewards, with the quality of the interaction (particularly how intense the acceptance or dumbing down is) of course playing an important role (King, McLaughlin, Silk, & Monahan, 2018; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Weigard, Chein, Albert, Smith, & Steinberg, 2014). Promoting a peer approach in relation to children and adolescents who are emotionally unstable, have peer acceptance problems, reduced sociability, or resocialization symptoms appears to be particularly beneficial; these are mostly problems and symptoms resulting from negative experiences in social relationships or from difficulties related to joining a collective. Through a peer approach in the school team, it is possible to provide encouragement and support to such pupils and students, helping them to socialise equally through positive acceptance and understanding. There are several possibilities: the cooperative approach can be the result of the influence of the teacher who initiates healthier communication and belonging in the classroom, but cooperative activities can be part of a comprehensive school climate that promotes mutual respect, freedom, solidarity, and openness (open schools promote democratic ideas, e.g., through democratic student councils) (Saroyan, 2021).

Peer mediation is a specific type of school mediation in which the facilitator of the conflict resolution is a peer; a pupil or student who initiates the appropriate conditions for the mediation conversation and accompanies his/her classmates in resolving the situation. It is a process of conflict resolution between pupils (peers), and between teachers and pupils through trained peer mediators (pupils/students) who are guided to develop negotiation skills. The guiding principle is to facilitate and structure the problem-solving process by empowering the discussing students to negotiate their interests in a fair manner and to make an agreement together as to how they will solve their problem (Bednařík, 2001). Peer mediation in schools has

a strong potential to shape a friendly, open working environment and positive interpersonal relationships, which can more successfully prevent social pathology from entering this space and thus protect not only the students, but ultimately the teachers as well. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that the responsibility for the school's events is shared, and decentralised; the distribution of responsibility for the school's atmosphere among all actors, including pupils/students, is a welcoming step towards equality, tolerance, freedom, and inclusion in this environment. These are basic principles of democracy, the observance of which is still not a common practice in our schools, while the abuse of power still occurs at a very high rate in this environment (Dončevová & Križo, 2021). Sharing responsibility requires sharing power; in the case of peer mediation, this means that some of the power in organizing, managing, deciding, and resolving within the school is shifted from adults to adolescents. We see this as an extremely positive step towards future generations: expressing trust and respect for the abilities of young people, passing on knowledge and experience, and demanding the assumption of responsibility are serious steps that will produce the desired results of a strong, independent, and responsible population of young people. Free, critically thinking, and authentic individuals are what we want in the processes of upbringing and education.

There are many positive outcomes of peer mediation, we consider the following to be the most important:

- new social experiences and skills (Martinková, 2014);
- the formation of a positive, healthy, and safe environment;
- strengthening students' ability to manage conflicts;
- improving relationships and school climate;
- the opportunity to express their own feelings and release emotions;
- a shared journey towards a desired outcome;
- empathy for each other's situation;
- transformation of conflicting relationships and anchoring oneself in the collective (Cremin, 2007);
- development of verbal skills and the art of argumentation;
- development of logical thinking and communication;
- fostering responsibility for the improvement of mutual relations and solidarity;
- greater responsibility for creating and fulfilling agreements (Baraldi, 2012);
- resolving conflicts in a non-violent way (McWilliam, 2010);
- the acquisition of skills that lead to effective resolution;
- fostering a democratic way of thinking (Hollá, 2011);
- taking responsibility for one's feelings and behaviour (Lawrence, 2000);
- the opportunity to play an active role in decision-making on issues that affect children and young people;

- practical life skills such as mutual respect, communication, and cooperation (Tyrrel, 2002);
- effective problem-solving where problems arise (subsidiarity principle).

In addition to the preventive dimension, peer mediation has another exceptional potential, which is avoiding direct intervention. It is desirable for the situation to be resolved between the children themselves, without the direct intervention of adults. The process of mutual reconciliation, as opposed to direct intervention (and possible punishment for the perpetrator), is more effective for both parties - in the case of the victim, it helps to strengthen her resilience; in the case of the perpetrator, it helps to rationalise, and at the same time emotionalise, his view of the victim and to foster his empathy; the act of violence also has an educational effect in this case. An agreement that is entered into voluntarily by both parties is more likely to be kept. A jointly resolved conflict is a positive example for the whole school community, a model of assertive and polite communication, a strategy for protection against violence, the development of healthy interpersonal relations and pro-social behaviour.

Other preventive tools have similar starting points to peer mediation. One of them is the Cross - group friendship model, which fosters more harmonious inter-group relations in the classroom; it helps to create conditions that promote friendship between groups, the development of positive relationships and putting trust first. The classroom inter-group model helps prepare young people for quality and lasting inter-group relationships by encouraging their confidence to have successful interpersonal interactions (Turner & Cameron, 2016). Research in this area (Turner et al., 2013) has focused on friendships in segregated (Catholic or Protestant) and integrated (mixed Catholic and Protestant) groups in secondary schools in Northern Ireland. In a country where conflict between the two religious groups has a historical context and segregation between the two communities persists, children with experience of intergroup friendships showed greater empathy, self-reflection, self-efficacy, self-control, self-knowledge, and more positive attitudes towards others. Schools are spaces that should create opportunities for cross-group friendships, especially with children from majority groups; such conditions have been found to prepare young people for future experiences of relationships beyond the school gates. They need to be provided with basic support and guidance in order to develop children's confidence in contact by educators stepping up interventions to promote this confidence and remove existing barriers (Turner & Cameron, 2016). Another option is Cooperative Learning; this is a preventative method by which socially isolated students are able to form new strong friendships. The method emphasizes teachers creating opportunities for positive interaction with peers through carefully

structured group learning activities at school. In a study of peers in fifteen middle schools in the Pacific Northwest (N=1,460 7th graders), cooperative learning was found to significantly eliminate bullying, secondary victimization of bullying victims, stress, and emotional problems. Given that cooperative learning increases student engagement and achievement over the long term, cooperative learning should be a permanent and sustainable component of teacher preparation and school culture improvement (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Intense friendships and their impact on the elimination of bullying are also highlighted by the findings of other research (e.g., Xu, Ren, Li, & Wang, 2020). However, in addition to the promotion of school friendships, other social factors, such as appropriate parenting style (democratic principles, trust, and understanding) or positive family relationships, also play a large role in the prevention of bullying at school, which are directly involved in the formation of students' resilience to bullying. Based on current findings, it is recommended to intensify school interventions and parental participation in preventing and addressing pre-existing bullying, fostering the creation of a friendly environment and students' sense of responsibility for what happens in it (Caridade, Sousa, & Pimenta Dinis, 2020; Dawn Frazier, Riedl Cross, Cross, & Mihyeon, 2021).

When developing a prevention programme, it is also desirable to use the latest technologies to which children and young people are close. The potential of computer games in preventing bullying has been studied by researchers from the Department of Software Engineering and Artificial Intelligence, Complutense University of Madrid, who have analysed several serious games developed to prevent and detect cyberbullying (Calvo-Morata, Alonso-Fernández, Freire, Martínez-Ortiz, & Fernández-Manjón, 2020). According to the authors, computer games are an effective and highly motivational educational tool that can change attitudes, increase users' awareness and skills, and increase positive response in many socio-pathological areas. Although the games analysed used different mechanisms and strategies, they had a positive impact on raising awareness of the problem of bullying, strengthening empathy and learning new strategies to deal with school bullying; they even proved to be effective in the case of cyberbullying, although it is thanks to technology that cyberbullying is widespread among children. The authors recommend using similar techniques in computer games to address other social problems with similar characteristics (e.g. discrimination, domestic violence, environmental issues, or media literacy, etc.). The non-negligible positives of these games are the opportunity to understand the problem in the safety of the game environment and to experience the consequences of decisions within the game, which has a positive impact on empathy and constructive behaviour (Calvo-Morata, Alonso-Fernández, Freire, Martínez-Ortiz, & Fernández-Manjón, 2020).

### **Peer mediator and elimination of bullying**

A peer mediator is a pupil/student who has received special training in communication and mediation skills. This role can be held by children and young people regardless of gender, social status, level of education, race, or religion. However, it should be borne in mind that the peer mediator is a role model for others and should therefore be selected according to clear rules. These include personal qualities, value priorities, but also willingness, and respect for the other pupils' differences. The peer mediator should demonstrate a higher level of self-esteem, self-control, and should have good problem-solving skills, not only in school but also outside (Davies, 2017).

The peer mediator training programme is based on social learning theory. It assumes that children find the behaviour of their peer mediators sympathetic, will naturally emulate them even in difficult social situations, and adopt them as role models for their behaviour. The program aims to increase the ability to control their emotions, improve their knowledge of conflict situations, learn strategies for effective conflict resolution, and strengthen their ability to resolve conflicts through constructive communication (Hollá, 2011). The training should result in an integrated personality of the peer mediator. The programme is conducted in the form of games, creative activities, and simulated situations. Students are introduced to the use of communication skills in conflict prevention and resolution, the nature of aggression and conflict theory, communication techniques, and the peer mediation process. The selection of pupils for the programme can be varied, ranging from voluntary self-selection to purposive selection. Marian Liebmann (2000), for example, recommends that prospective peer mediators should be selected from a variety of social backgrounds, as this reflects the image of the system and the philosophy of the school. Peer mediators should also represent the composition of the pupils in the school in terms of diversity of gender, nationality, religion, etc.

The positive consequences of peer mediation are clearly beneficial not only for the children, but also for the teachers, the school, and the community (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Lawrence, 2000; Tyrrell, 2002). Expected benefits include increased self-esteem, self-respect, improved relationships, a sense of responsibility, elimination of conflict situations, promotion of school achievement, and development of skills necessary for community life. These resilience development factors are useful for future generations not only in the case of bullying at school, but also in preventing other forms of violence against children (cyberbullying, sexual violence, CAN syndrome), or even in preventing other forms of social pathology (addictions, criminality, etc.). Better school working conditions characterise an environment in which pupils can learn and socialise safely and constructively, and teachers can

work better and be positive role models. According to Jerry Tyrrell (2002), peer mediation represents a comprehensive improvement of the educational environment; it improves interpersonal and communication skills, group cooperation skills, personal growth, and civic responsibility. These are skills our children will need to be successful not only in work but especially in personal relationships.

Peer mediation in schools has been shown to have positive outcomes (King, McLaughlin, Silk, & Monahan, 2018; Saroyan, 2021). Of course, it would be naïve to claim that mediation will eliminate bullying permanently. But the increase in a child's self-esteem will enable him or her (along with the use of coping strategies) to confront the bullying, work through his or her emotions, and gradually come to terms with the situation. Peer mediation complements the school's philosophy of discipline and positive behaviour. It promotes a sensitive environment where everyone knows that bullying is unacceptable; it also promotes the idea that help and support will be given to anyone who needs it. There is hope from case studies in which former pupil bullies have become skilled peer mediators (Lawrence, 2000).

Perhaps the most significant criticism of peer mediation is that it does not offer the same benefits to all pupils: only certain individuals can become mediators (a criticism of the selection rules); mediation provides implementers with benefits that arise from the nature of the mediator's work and are not available to other pupils, and the temptation of abuse of power associated with the position is a non-negligible factor. The fact is that the peer mediator has greater opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and experience that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to experience at this age. However, in the role of peer mediator, it is the peer mediator's role to pass on these benefits to his or her peers; this is already a matter of ethics, honour, and individual responsibility. Students trained as peer mediators benefit the most from a peer mediation program, and only then the peer mediation participants (Strawhun, Parnell, Peterson, & Palmo, 2014). The truth is likely to be somewhere in the middle. Peer mediators, once trained, become a kind of "expert" in the field of peer mediation, but at the same time take responsibility for the conduct and outcome of the mediation process. If the mediation process is to be successful, there should be a levelling of positions at the end of the mediation process, and all parties involved should benefit from this (empowerment of the mediated parties and further positive experience of the peer mediator). The positives of peer mediation seem to outweigh the negatives and the personal failings of the individual should not diminish the good intention of the idea and the meaningfulness of the activity. The assumption is that those who enter the mediation process will take away more from it than they bring to it. Positive relationships, trust, support, open communication, mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation benefit all. But this assumes

that hierarchical and repressive approaches to conflict do not prevail in the school (Tyrrell, 2002). Mark Bitel and Delia Rolls (2000) remind us that peer mediation should not replace conventional school rules, but complement them so that pupils have a choice of alternative ways of approaching school conflict resolution. One of the negatives of peer mediation compared to specific prevention programmes is that it requires a significant upfront investment (time, energy and finances) if a peer mediation programme is to be successful in a school (Bitel & Rolls, 2000).

Doing anything is better than doing nothing. However, it is the external expectations of what is to result from the school's activity on the issue that are important (Mehta & Fine, 2019). In addition to improving the school working environment, it should also be the acquisition of the practical competences that life in the current context requires. Social sentiments across countries increasingly tend to promote radicalism and dehumanisation rather than tolerance and consensus-seeking (McGhee, 2021). The question for the near future will be how extensively educators can use existing inclusive practices to humanize their schools and classrooms, and foster understanding and respect for individuals and communities.

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