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## **Vzt'ah učiteľa a žiaka v kontexte školského šikanovania: rola obrancov a prihliadajúcich**

### **The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Context of School Bullying: the Role of Defenders and Bystanders**

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#### **Abstract**

The study aims to investigate the relationship between the quality of the teacher-student relationship and students' roles in school bullying situations, focusing on bystanders and defenders of victims. The aim was to identify whether positive relationships with teachers can promote students' prosocial behavior and contribute to them active intervention in bullying. The results of the research indicator that a significant relationship was notes confirmed between the defender and bystander roles and relationships with the teacher. The findings point to the importance of analyzing other variables that play a role in bullying.

**Keywords:** Relationship teacher – student. Bystander. Defender. Bullying.

#### **Introduction**

Bullying is a complex social phenomenon that affects the emotional, social and academic functioning of children and adolescents. It is a form of aggressive behavior in which an individual or group is intentionally harmed, often in the context of an imbalance of power. In a school environment, bullying has serious consequences not only for the victims, but also for the overall school climate and relationships between students.

The term bullying comes from the French word “chicane”, which means malicious harassment, abuse, torment, persecution (Řičan, 1995). Olweus (1993) characterizes bullying as when a child is bullied or victimized when he is repeatedly exposed to negative actions by one or more persons over a period of time. Bullying is understood as intentional harm that takes place between an aggressor and a victim. Bullying involves aggressive, intentional acts carried out by a group or individual repeatedly and over a long period of time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself. Bullying is repeated negative behavior that aims to harm or intimidate victims (Andersen et al., 2015, p. 1). It is considered unfair and immoral behavior (Romera et al., 2019), a serious offense and illegal action that is independent of school rules, while causing harm to the victim (Thornberg et al., 2017). Bullying is

an unacceptable phenomenon that occurs to varying degrees and forms in schools (Hellström et al., 2015; Thornberg, 2015). According to Kolář (2011), one can talk about various external manifestations of bullying, on the basis of which he describes individual forms of bullying. Bullying is divided into: (a) direct and indirect bullying, (b) physical and verbal bullying, (c) active and passive bullying. An external view of bullying is essential for the first orientation to the problem of bullying. It helps to separate bullying from other forms of aggressive behavior.

Research also confirms that the quality of the teacher-student relationship can be either a risk factor or a protective factor in relation to the occurrence of bullying. The results of the study (Sulkowski, & Simmons, 2017) indicate that quality teacher-student relationships can act as a significant protective factor that reduces the psychosocial stress associated with peer victimization. The findings showed that positive interactions between teachers and students, good peer relationships, and perceptions of fair school rules are negatively associated with the occurrence of victimization and the level of psychosocial stress. However, of all the variables examined, teacher-student relationships had the most significant impact. In other words, a quality and supportive teacher-student relationship can reduce the negative consequences of peer bullying and is an effective tool for prevention and intervention in the school environment.

Espelage (2014) supports a multi-system approach to understanding bullying and preventing it more effectively. At the most cost-effective level, all teachers in schools should have the opportunity and professional development opportunities to understand bullying and learn how to intervene and address it. She suggests that teachers and students work together to gain knowledge and skills to reduce bullying and promote prosocial behavior. But student-teacher collaboration alone will not bring about real change in bullying. Teachers and the entire teaching staff, along with the principal, must work together to influence the ecology (the social climate of the school). She suggests the following effective steps in schools:

(a) First, schools should involve parents in their school committees and work together to coordinate various school events with the participation of other parents, providing transportation, childcare, and meals. Newsletters and e-mails should also be used to communicate with parents.

(b) Second, many schools have partnered with community agencies and faith-based organizations to address bullying and ensure that youth and their families know where to seek help. Some schools host anti-bullying events at family recreation centers, museums, and various festivals.

(c) Third, school administrators should work closely with local media to highlight their bullying prevention initiatives and encourage community involvement. It recommends that October of each year be designated as Bullying Awareness Month. Youth should also be actively involved in bullying prevention and intervention.

Bullying is a serious social and pedagogical problem that negatively affects mental health, social relationships and school climate. The relationship between teachers and students plays a key role in both preventing and solving bullying, because teachers can act as important moderators of behavior in the classroom. Their sensitivity, attitude and ability to respond adequately to manifestations of aggression directly affect the level of safety and trust that students experience in the school environment, therefore, examining these relationships is extremely important in the school environment.

The aim of the study is to examine the prevalence of bullying, gender differences in bullying behavior. We are interested in the relationship between bullying, or rather individual role groups (defender, bystander) and the quality of the relationship between teacher and student. We want to determine the differences in the perception of the quality of the relationship between teachers and students with respect to role groups.

### **Research methods**

#### ***Bullying Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996)***

Bullying behavior was measured abbreviated version Questionnaire on bullying. Introduction questionnaire included short definition bullying. Questionnaire contained 6 items focused on analysis individual roll groups students in the classroom (aggressor, victim, defender, non-participants) bullying). For the criterion confirmations bullying (Solberg, Olweus, 2003) considers occurrence given behavior over the past two or three months and not only how is it right now now, whether last week.

#### ***Teacher-Student Relationship Scale (Delaware School Climate Survey-Student, Bear et al., 2011)***

The Teacher-Student Relationship Scale is part of the School Climate Questionnaire (Bear et al., 2011). Teacher-student relationships refer to the perceived quality of interactions with adults in the school; in particular, teachers' expressions of warmth, respect, fairness, and recognition. Respondents respond on a 4-point Likert scale (0- I cannot judge, 1- strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- agree, 4- strongly agree).

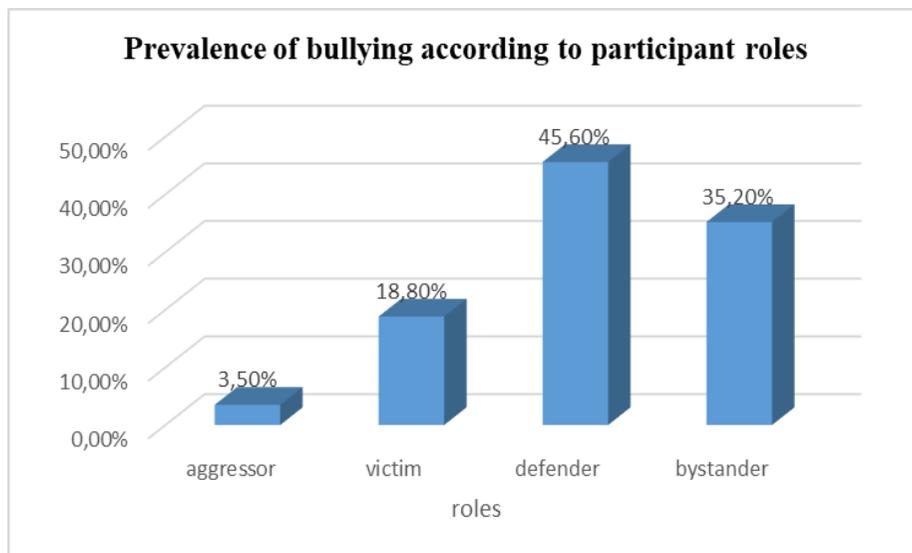
### **Research file**

The research sample consisted of 719 respondents, of whom 194 were men and 525 were women. The average age of men was (M=19.6; SD=1.55), and of women (M=19.74; SD=1.55). Participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary, and respondents could discontinue the research at any time. Data collection was conducted in a combination of in-person and online methods.

## Research results

One of the objectives of the research was to analyze the prevalence of bullying. The results of the research showed that the number of aggressors is 25 (3.5%), victims 135 (18.8%), defenders 328 (45.6%), and bystanders 253 (35.2%). The results are shown in more detail in Chart No. 1.

Chart No. 1: Incidence of bullying in relation to individual role groups



We then analyzed the frequency of occurrence of individual role groups with respect to bullying behavior. The results showed that 54 men (8.3%) and 274 women (42.3%) were in the defender role, and 47 men (7.3%) and 206 women (31.8%) were bystanders.

Given the nature of the data, we used Spearman's correlation coefficient. Within the individual roles and perceptions of the relationship with the teacher, we did not demonstrate a statistically significant connection with the role of defender, but in the role of bystander, we confirmed significance, which was very weak ( $p < .05$ ). The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation relationship of the defender role, taking into account the teacher-student relationship

Variables	M	SD	Defender	Bystander
Teacher-student relationship	10.3	3.16	.022	-.08*

Teacher-student relationship; \* $p < .05$

We used the Welch coefficient to test for differences. For the defender role, we did not show statistically significant differences in the teacher-student relationship compared to students who did not participate in bullying ( $p > .05$ ). For the bystander role, we did not show statistically significant differences in the quality of the teacher-student relationship ( $p > .05$ ). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table No. 2: Testing differences – teacher-student relationship with respect to individual role groups

Variables	role		t(646)	p	Cohen's d		
	M	SD				M	SD
Defender x Teacher-student relationship	10.2	3.08	10.4	3.23	.913	.362	.0717
Bystander x Teacher-student relationship	10.5	3.13	10.1	3.19	-1.53	.127	-.123

Teacher-student relationship; \* $p < .05$

## Discussion

One of the main objectives of the research was to examine **the prevalence of bullying** in the school population and to identify the extent to which students engage in individual roles within this social phenomenon. The results obtained provide an important picture of the incidence of bullying and the dynamics of relationships between students.

The findings showed that 25 students (3.5%) were in the role of aggressor. This relatively low proportion indicates that overt bullying behaviour, such as physical or verbal assault, is not dominant in the sample studied, but its presence is still significant, as even a small percentage of aggressors can have a significant impact on the classroom climate and the overall social environment of the school. A much higher proportion was recorded in the group of victims of bullying, which included 135 students (18.8%). This figure is alarming, as approximately one in five students in our research reported having been a victim of bullying. This result confirms that bullying remains a serious and widespread problem in the school environment. The largest group in our research were defenders, i.e. students who actively sided with the victims or tried to stop the bullying. There were 328 students (45.6%) in this category. This high proportion can be interpreted as a positive

signal, indicating the presence of prosocial values and empathy among the majority of students. It also points to the potential that schools can exploit in preventing bullying by strengthening the role of defenders and promoting collective responsibility for a safe and respectful school environment. According to findings in the USA (Roberts et al., 2013), 25% of students in urban schools have been bullied, compared to 29% in suburban schools and 30% in rural schools. A Spanish study of 5th and 6th grade students showed similar rates of bullying in urban and rural areas (Rodríguez-Álvarez, Navarro, & Yubero, 2022). Overall, the results indicate a significant imbalance between the number of aggressors and victims, which may also reflect social dynamics in which a smaller group of initiators influences a larger group of classmates. At the same time, the high number of defenders points to the possibilities of effective intervention – if the school manages to systematically develop prosocial behavior, promote empathy and reduce tolerance for bullying, the rate of victimization can also be significantly reduced.

The results of the analysis of the distribution of role groups in the context of bullying behavior pointed to interesting **gender differences**. We specifically focused on the role of defenders and bystanders. The most numerous group in our research were defenders, students who actively intervened on behalf of victims. This role included 54 men (8.3%) and up to 274 women (42.3%). This result suggests that girls tend to take on a prosocial role more often, which may be related to their higher level of empathy, sensitivity to social relationships and a greater tendency to supportive behavior. Similarly, up to 206 women (31.8%) and only 47 men (7.3%) were in the bystander role. Overall, these results point to gender-specific differences in roles associated with bullying, with women more often in the defender position, while men are less involved in both roles. This suggests the need for a differentiated approach to prevention and intervention by gender, especially in the area of supporting boys to more actively engage in the defender role and develop empathy.

As part of the analysis of the relationship between **the perception of the relationship with the teacher and the role of the student in the context of bullying**, we found interesting, although only partially statistically significant, results. It turned out that the perception of the relationship with the teacher does not play a significant role for students who find themselves in the role of defender. In other words, the quality of the relationship with the teacher was not associated with a higher probability of the student taking the side of the victim or actively trying to stop the bullying in our sample. This result may indicate that students' defensive behavior is to a greater extent conditioned by internal personality factors (e.g., empathy, moral values, self-efficacy) or the group norm of the classroom, rather than by the relationship with the teacher itself. Several studies confirm that warm, supportive, and non-conflictual relationships between teachers and students are associated with lower levels

of antisocial and aggressive behavior, including bullying. Conversely, negative, tense, or conflictual teacher-student relationships are often associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in bullying or other problematic behavior (Lucas-Molina et al., 2015).

A statistically significant but very weak association was found for the bystander role. This result suggests that the perception of the relationship with the teacher can to some extent influence the behavior of a student who becomes a passive witness to bullying. Students who perceive the relationship with the teacher as less supportive or less trustworthy may be less motivated to intervene on behalf of the victim because they do not believe in the effectiveness of the teacher's response or in the fairness of the system. Conversely, if a student perceives the teacher as fair, helpful, and consistent in resolving conflicts, they are more likely to behave more actively—for example, by warning the teacher or supporting the victim.

Overall, the results can be interpreted as indicating that teachers play a significant, but not direct, role in the bullying prevention process in schools. A high-quality and trustworthy relationship between teacher and student does not directly increase the proportion of defenders, but it can reduce the level of passivity among bystanders and support a culture of openness and trust, which is crucial for effective bullying prevention.

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