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## Bullying and exclusion from dominant peer group in Polish middle schools.

**Abstract:** School bullying also referred to as peer victimization is considered extremely harmful for all parties involved. It has been recognised as an important issue in Polish schools. This article presents the first stage of a project financed by the National Centre of Research and Development and includes the results of qualitative research conducted in groups of middle-school students, middle-school teachers and psychologists. The results highlight several factors leading to the exclusion from the dominant peer group. The results also indicate that although students are aware of the consequences of bullying and excluding behaviours, they do not implement this knowledge when explaining their own excluding actions. All results are discussed in terms of designing and implementing a data-based programme which would effectively mitigate excluding behaviours during middle-school transition.

**Key words:** bullying, exclusion, school transition, social innovation

### Introduction

Middle-school boys and girls negotiate and construct their identities in response to different factors. One, crucially important identity, is being “the part of the in-crowd” (Warrington, Younger, 2011) which allows integration and inclusion with peers who are valued. The peer group is “the half -way house between the family and the adult world.” (Gay, 1992, p. 207) and the group of vital importance. Thus helping students in creating an inclusive and supportive class where they can feel safe is one of the most important task for teachers and educators. If, for any reason, this task fails, then excluding, bullying and victimisation behaviours can increase – a fact supported by extensive research (Olweus, 2003). Having recognised the importance of the problem we have decided to undertake the investigation on exclusion and bullying in Polish middle-schools. Our research was fully financed by The National Centre of Research and Development under the program of Social Innovations. The aim of presented study was to research and describe reasons and forms of social exclusion from dominant peer groups; factors which might influence the process and the aspects of excluding and bullying behaviours which are connected with peer group dynamics,

the school system and the emotional climate of the class. In order to obtain a broader view and different perspectives, we interviewed students, teachers and psychologists involved in the middle-school educational process.

Being aware of certain limitations imposed by the qualitative nature of the research and by analysing the bullying process from the perspective of the individual (Carney & Merrell, 2001) we intended to pay attention to the meaning of the group dynamic particularly in the formation of group hierarchy during middle school transition period as one of the main processes underpinning exclusion in a school class (e.g. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1996).

We hope that findings from this research will bring supplementary guidelines for existing bullying-prevention programs (e.g. Allen, 2010; Bauer, Lozano & Rivara, 2007; Deptuła, 2013; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Kamińska-Buśko & Szymańska, 2005; Kołodziejczyk, 2004; Olweus, Limber & Mihalik, 1999) in order to increase their effectiveness by adapting them to the specifics of the Polish education system, as well as the distinctive demands of middle school transition time and students’ developmental stage.

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The literature concerning the issue of social exclusion covers a great diversity of topics, which might be classified in three main streams: reasons and predictors of social exclusion in a peers group (e.g. Bierman, Smoot, Aumiller, 1993; Musialaska, 2011; Rieffe, Villanueva, & Terwogt, 2005; Urban, 2012), understanding the process and mechanisms of social exclusion (e.g. Bierman, 2004; Coie, 1990; Deptuła, 2013; Sandstrom & Zakirsi, 2004) and extensive consequences of rejection by peers (e.g. Boivin, Hymel, Bukowski, 1995, Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006; Schaffer, 2006; Urban, 2001; Warrington & Younger, 2011). Although the growing body of research on school bullying has increased the implementation of intervention and prevention programs, it is still one of the greatest social and health risks to youth in the USA (AERA, 2013) and in European Countries, including Poland (WHO, 2011). These circumstances led us to the decision of undertaking actions in order to mitigate the occurrence of excluding behaviours and bullying in Polish middle schools. It seems even more important when we take under consideration two facts. One of them of showing that since middle schools were reinstated in Poland in 1999 (after 52 years) the level of bullying and violence has systematically increased (WHO, 2011). Another fact, supported by consistent evidence suggests that school-based intervention can significantly reduce bullying behaviour (WHO, 2011).

We limited our sample to Polish middle school students, teachers and psychologist due to several reasons. One of these was the fact that this stage of development (the age of 12-15) and stage of education brings huge challenges for adapting behaviours, which has been pointed out in many papers (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan & Mac Iver, 1993; Shell, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). We assumed that the process of social exclusion might appear in at middle schools especially during school transition as this time can be very challenging, regardless of the system or school organisation. Students need to adjust to new policies, practices, subjects, buildings, and teachers. Above all, they have to manage much larger number of social relations (Sendyk, 2001; Shell, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2014; Pellegrini, 2002). The entry of many unacquainted students into a new school exhorts a collective renegotiation of social relations in which youth must form new groups and hierarchies (Shell, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2014). This includes maintaining friendships with peers from elementary school, forming new friendships and negotiating hierarchy (Bellmore, 2011). The situation is difficult both for students and school staff (Wentzel, 1998) particularly when we consider the fact that students entering the middle school are in the developmental stage where identification with the group, and peer acceptance are of paramount importance for shaping individual identity and ensuring well-being (Bardziejewska, 2005).

The second reason was connected with the Polish education system which differs significantly from those in the USA or the United Kingdom. In Polish middle schools, students are assigned to one class unit and share all lessons with the same students for three years. There is a teacher

– tutor for each class who is responsible for the students, conducts parents' meetings, organises and joins class trips and should have individual contact with students in the case of any problems. There is one hour in the week's timetable when tutors and their classes meet to deal with organisational matters, attendance, behaviour problems, interpersonal issues etc. In other European countries or in the US students are given more freedom, as they move to different classrooms for different subjects, and become part of several sets of students every day. Some schools practice interdisciplinary teaming which consists of a core set of teachers who teach the same group of students (a subset of same-grade students). Although teaming is documented to be beneficial for students and teachers especially during transition, it may also increase victimisation of students with low social preference (Echols, 2015). Both academic teaming and the Polish system bring a danger of long term victimisation caused by social exclusion from the dominant peer group. What is more, when we compare class populations in Poland and the United Kingdom or the USA in terms of ethnic and religious diversity (Buchowski & Chlewińska, 2010), the Polish one is rather homogenous, which makes our students more responsive to any dissimilarity, which may be the reason of social exclusion.

The third reason - the results of a WHO Cross-national Collaborative Study on health behaviour in school-aged children carried out in 2009-2011 showed that bullying incidents in Polish middle schools exceeded the average level of school violence determined for 28 countries. Moreover, one of the researchers (Wójcik) used to work as a middle school teacher and class tutor and had personally experienced the lack of instrumental or formal support when dealing with interpersonal problems among students, managing group dynamics or handling negative consequences of rapid group hierarchisation which often resulted in the emergence of scapegoats and negative leaders.

The fourth reason was the importance assigned by numerous researchers to the peer group dynamics as a factor shaping the rejection process among middle school students (Forsyth, 2006; Gini, 2005; Jones, Haslam, York & Ryan, 2008; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Sendyk, 2001; Wentzel, 1998). Research shows that victimisation and exclusion increase on average at school transition (Shell, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2014) because victimisation serves to establish social hierarchies during the formation of peer group and exclusion to maintain it (Pellegrini, 2002). Many students find transition easy and smooth while others face serious social and academic challenges (Andrews, Bishop, 2012). Those students who are good at: "Strategic manoeuvres designed to achieve, manage, maintain collective peer group status in the conflict ridden environment of the co-educational classroom" (Smith, 2007, p. 181) can enjoy acceptance and inclusion in the dominant peer group. On the other hand, those who don't have these abilities or experience, are in danger of being labelled as different. Not being categorised as a member of the ingroup is a reason enough for discriminatory behaviours to begin (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social exclusion and bullying are forms of

discrimination which are defined as negative intentional actions aimed at causing physical or psychological harm to one or more students who are weaker and unable to defend themselves (Nesdale & Scarlett, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996). Neuman and Baron (1998) identified more than 30 behaviours which could be considered to be bullying. Although the level of their harmfulness and intensity differ drastically, the majority of them appear at schools. Examples of bullying tactics may include openly violent behaviour such as hitting, intimidating gestures, name-calling but could also have less direct ways for example spreading rumours, hiding or stealing belongings or sending offensive e-mails or comments. This could also extend to a wide array of behaviours which include ignoring, rejection and exclusion but it is important to notice that excluding behaviours are considered both as reasons and triggers for further bullying or as bullying itself (AERA, 2013; Olweus, 1993). From the applied perspective none of bullying behaviour should be ignored at school environment as the consequences are serious: victims may suffer emotional and school difficulties, problems with relationships, low self-esteem and may have increased susceptibility to depression (Sharp, Thompson, & Arora, 2000). Bullying and victimisation have also been related to aggression, anger, violence, externalising problems, illness, school avoidance, poor academic performance and, increased fear and anxiety (Olweus, 2003). Disturbing statistics show that in Lithuania 26% of girls and 30% of boys reported been bullied while in Poland 8 and 14 % (Belgium 18,31%; Estonia 17,24%; Canada 15,17%) (WHO, 2011). When we consider that bullying has a negative impact on not only victims but also on aggressors and bystanders, it is likely that it affects most students at the same time.

### **Method**

The presented study was conducted by researchers from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in a group of middle school (junior high school) students, their teachers and psychologists/pedagogues cooperating with schools. A qualitative design using focus group interviews was chosen because the interactions between participants were believed to bring rich thoughts and ideas as they all shared the same context of middle school. Three groups were interviewed on the same issues as we assumed that they may have different perspectives and opinions on school violence, excluding behaviours and bullying. Our research was fully financed by The National Centre of Research and Development under the program of Social Innovations and was independent from teaching authorities or schools management, thus without any conflict of interests. The main aim of the present study was to gain knowledge which would help educators and practitioners prevented or mitigate the process of excluding individual students from their peer groups. The main investigator (M.W.) had worked as a teacher and tutor in a middle school environment prior to entering the field of research. This allowed for an increased insight and sensitivity to the problems reported by the responders. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

### **Participants**

Three groups of responders were involved in the study ( $n=72$ ); 24 middle -school students, 24 middle school teachers and tutors, 15 pedagogues and 9 psychologists. Students were attending 17 different schools in Silesia region. Sixteen students attended public schools; two, independent schools; one, sport school; one, catholic school; four, school of fine arts. At the time when interviews were conducted they were in second and third grade of middle school (Table 1 - See page 4). The interviewed teachers worked in 18 different schools in the Silesia region. Fifteen of them were teaching in public schools, five in independent school, and four in the school of fine arts. At the time when the interviews were conducted twenty of them were class tutors, three were tutors in previous years and one had never been a tutor. They all had Master's degrees in the subject they were teaching and had teaching qualifications (Table 2 - See page 4). The pedagogues and psychologists worked in twenty different institutions: sixteen of them worked in middle schools (fourteen in public, two in independent), eight worked in psychological and pedagogical counselling clinics (Table 3 - See page 5). The group of teachers/tutors will be referred to as teachers; the group psychologists/pedagogues as psychologists.

### **Procedure and data collection**

Researchers contacted participants and invited them to focus group interviews, most of which were conducted at schools, counselling clinics and University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted for about 60-90 minutes, prior to which participants were asked to sign a consent form. As some of the participants (middle school students) were under the age of eighteen their parents/legal guardians were also asked to sign the consent forms. The interviews took place between September and November 2013, each of them was recorded and transcribed after the session.

**Table 1**  
Study Participants (middle school students)

No.	Code	Grade	Type of school
1	Sławek	2	Independent
2	Karina	3	Public
3	Kasia	3	Public
4	Zuzia	3	Art
5	Lena	3	Public
6	Pati	3	Art
7	Ania	3	Public
8	Kasia 2	3	Public
9	Kasia 3	3	Public
10	Marek	3	Art
11	Kamil	2	Sport
12	Basia	3	Public
13	Kari	3	Public
14	Zosia	3	Public
15	Kamil 2	3	Public
16	Marysia	3	Art
17	Zuzia 2	3	Public
18	Zbyszek	3	Public
19	Mirek	3	Public
20	Paweł	3	Public
21	Aga	3	Public
22	Beata	3	Public
23	Piotrek	3	Catholic
24	Sławek	2	Independent

**Data Analysis**

All responses were analysed using the thematic analysis procedure (Braun, Clarke, 2006) within a constructionist framework (Burr, 2003). In this kind of analysis the development of themes consists of interpretative work and produces theorised descriptions of social phenomena addressed by responders. It focuses on themes which underpin what is presented in the data in order to suggest broader assumptions and theorise the social-cultural context and structural settings. It involved search across the data set to find repeated patterns of meaning. As interviews were conducted in three groups of responders the same procedure was applied for each group separately and then the themes that emerged were compared between three groups. NVIVO 10 (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) was used for data administration. The analysis began with reading the data in the form of in-depth interviews transcripts in order to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research topic, which was then organised into meaningful groups and initial codes were produced. During the next stage, researchers re-focused their analysis at the broader level sorting the different codes into

potential, overarching themes which were then reviewed at the level of coded data extracts and at the entire data set to ensure that exhaustive collection of data to support each theme were identified. The next stage of analysis consisted of selecting most significant themes and describing their scope and content. As researchers chose codes and themes independently, the comparison and discussion followed until a consensus was reached. Special attention was paid to how similar problems and issues of middle school context were perceived by each group of responders namely students, teachers and psychologists.

**Table 2**  
Study participants (middle school teachers)

No.	Code	Type of school
1	A.K.	Independent
2	D.Ż	Independent
3	Ł.P.	Independent
4	D.P.	Independent
5	R.W.	Independent
6	B.B.	Art
7	O.L.	Art
8	K.S.	Art
9	M.N.	Art
10	A.S.	Public
11	P.W.	Public
12	M.W.1	Public
13	K.K.	Public
14	A.O.	Public
15	Z.N.	Public
16	W.D.	Public
17	W.R.	Public
18	C.M.	Public
19	K.G.	Public
20	F.K.	Public
21	A.M.	Public
22	S.B.	Public
23	N.B.	Public
24	E.W.	Public



**Table 3**  
Study participants (middle school psychologists and pedagogues)

No.	Code	Type of school
1	D.S.	Public school
2	P.T.	Public school
3	J.O.	Public school
4	K.O.	Public school
5	M.S.1	Public school
6	K.K.	Public school
7	P.C.	Public school
8	A.K.	Public school
9	M.S.2	Public school
10	B.T.	Public school
11	J.P.	Public school
12	A.H.	Public school
13	K.P.	Public school
14	H.J.	Public school
15	M.K.	Independent school
16	M.P.	Independent school
17	K.K.2	Psychological counselling
18	R.A.	Psychological counselling
19	M.G.	Psychological counselling
20	W.G.	Psychological counselling
21	S.N	Psychological counselling
22	T.K.	Psychological counselling
23	S.C.	Psychological counselling
24	B.R.	Psychological counselling

## Results

The thematic analysis resulted in 38 categories which were grouped into 4 key themes.

- School transition
- Class emotional climate
- Excluding behaviours
- Excluded students

### School transition

Students perceived the moment of entering the new peer group in middle school as being the most difficult and stressful. Their greatest fear was connected with being left out in the class and not being accepted by the dominant peer group. This apprehensive attitude was not dependent on previous experience from elementary school (negative or positive.) As two students reported (their first days at school):

*I was really afraid because I didn't have good memories from elementary school. I had an awful class. As I didn't know anybody in my new school, I was afraid that it would happen again. Kasia*

*My fear was that I would be different and I wouldn't have any friends. I felt awful and I was nervous as it was all new to me. But end in end it went ok. Zuzia*

Those students who had had negative experiences from their previous class (11 students) saw the opportunity for more positive interactions with unfamiliar peers. They expected relative benefits from school transition, and were hoping for a “new beginning” and less mistreatment among peers who were all (or most of them) initially unfamiliar. At the same time they worried that “things may go wrong again.”

*I purposefully went to a different school than the students from my elementary school class, because I hoped for a positive change. I wanted to cut off from the past. Zuzia*

*I had negative memories from school. But here I saw that everything was different and better and students are friendlier. Lena*

The majority (22) of interviewed students were aware of the group dynamics after transition moment: establishing the hierarchy, choosing leaders, appearance of scapegoats, exclusion and marginalisation. They remembered the moment of realisation that the achieved position might be maintained for three years of middle school and it would significantly shape their every-day lives.

*It's important to suck up to the teacher, to suck up to everybody. To score as many points as possible. Life is easier then. Kasia 2*

*I had one thing in my mind - to get a good position in the class and not to be with the bullied ones. Kamil*

Teachers and psychologists agreed that transition is a great environmental stressor for all students. They enter a larger, unfamiliar context with many other young people they were not acquainted with so renegotiation of social relations is necessary, as well as the forming new groups and fitting into emerging hierarchies. Psychologists added that students needed to gain familiarity with new, bigger buildings and a greater number of teachers and subjects. Their weekly timetable becomes very busy, new subjects are usually more difficult and challenging. At the same time most of them enter the period of puberty which usually means emotional instability, greater tiredness and difficulties in concentration.

*This is a very difficult time for young people. Different things become important, life changes. They are expected to learn more, join new groups and attend much more lessons. At the same time they rebel against everything and anything. A pretty tough time. S.N.*

*Some children have to face their limitations. If they have strong family support they can manage. But new subjects, teachers, a new school, a new class. Sometimes it's too much and problems start. K.P.*

They also emphasised that because of the peer group importance challenges connected with entering the group are even more meaningful and stressful. Students try to fit into peer group and achieve a convenient position using different techniques for example forming smaller units of those who share similar characteristics. It gives the members the feeling of safety but at the same time leaves other students outside.

*Every difference is stigmatised. Students seek safety by forming alliances with those who are similar to them. But at the same time when a few students get together they tend to show their independence by bullying those outside. Especially the lonely ones. J.O.*

Psychologists (22) and teachers (16) agreed that one of the most serious problems of the transition period is the great diversity among students who enter the first class. Different background, interests and attitudes cause interpersonal problems, hinder integration and cooperation. Students are not prepared to appreciate diversity and differences, and it becomes a ground for categorisation, marginalisation, bullying and fights.

*The differences between children are huge. Kids don't know how to deal with it, how to talk to each other. So most often they just fight. K.O.*

Another problem emphasised by all teachers from public schools (14) and most psychologist (18) is the manner in which stronger students use aggression to obtain favourable social status shortly after transition. That makes shy, calm students more likely to become victims during the establishment of class hierarchy.

*Outgoing, strong students sometimes are loud and rude to show off their power. Z.N.*

Five teachers from independent schools and nine from public schools noticed that group processes start right away in the first day and proceed so rapidly that it becomes impossible to control them. In some classes scapegoats, fighting groups and stars emerge before teachers can prevent it. According to the teachers, it would be very helpful if the cooperation between elementary and middle school teachers was more effective. Information about students' interpersonal problems in elementary school could prove advantageous for monitoring and empowering their transition and integration with their new class.

*There are two scapegoats in my class. When I talked to their parents it turned out that they had the same problem in elementary school. If I had known earlier, I would have reacted, prevented, helped. D.P.*

### Class emotional climate

Three groups of responders perceived the emotional climate of a class as an important factor contributing to the well-being of students and staff members. Each group distinguished different aspects of class climate and had different views on causes, motives and possible obstacles. All interviewed students declared a strong need to be in a

good and supportive class as they realised that the emotional climate of a classroom affected not only their academic achievements but also their social life. It is also important as it encourages a feeling of safety, allows for openness and honesty and makes hard schoolwork more endurable.

*It gives me that feeling that I want to get up in the morning and go to school I am kind of willing to go. I am not afraid that something will happen to me. I can trust the others. It's very good. Stawek*

According to the students, factors contributing to a good supportive class are connected with personal characteristics of students, their attitude to school and the way they perceive common goals. Several things may hinder the integration and cooperation of a class, one of them is the occurrence of a negative leader (called "star", "king" or "queen"). Sixteen students mentioned the negative leader as being a major factor contributing to the destructive atmosphere and conflict within a class. In their opinion, the negative leader usually tries to have an impact on ingroup relations, manipulates students, plots, excludes certain students and creates groups which initiate the atmosphere of hostility, distrust and suspicion. Ten students mentioned that girls who were "stars" usually form a group of supporters around themselves and together bully other girls who don't look "right."

*-What does the leader do? M.W.*

*-He rules. Kamil*

*-What does that mean? M.W.*

*-Everybody listens to what he says and nobody opposes. Absolute power. Kamil*

*The worst are girls. There is a queen in my class. All pretty and shiny wearing all those fashionable clothes. You know, she has this "peanut gallery" who would laugh at you because you had wrong shoes or something. If she doesn't like another girl because she is for example fat. Life is over for her. Sara*

Only seven students out of twenty-four described their middle school class as badly integrated with an unsupportive climate of mutual distrust. They attributed the reason of this situation to the great diversity of students in terms of background, material status, interests, attitudes to studying, way of behaviour and plans for the future. Five of them mentioned also division of the class and the occurrence of negative leaders.

*People come from different schools, they have nothing in common with each other. The girls in my class are interested in make-up and sex and I want to study medicine in the future. Aga*

*If you put nerds, hooligans and normal people in one class you are bound to have problems. Ania*

Four students admitted that tutor involvement in creating a positive emotional climate is necessary while twenty students declared that they cannot be helped with establishing integrated, cohesive groups and they are mature enough to manage group processes by themselves. The only condition being:

*Cool students with no morons. And it's helpful when the teachers stay away. Marek*

Twenty students agreed that tutors are members of outgroup so they cannot understand the situation in the class. They have access to important information so actions rarely bring the desired effect and students should be able to deal with their own matters. Interpersonal issues didn't seem to be within teachers' interests range.

*If we have a problem in the class we try to solve it and we don't want the teacher to interfere. If he does it is usually a complete failure. It's not his fault though, it's just the way it is. Pawel*

Even those students who declared a positive attitude towards their tutor (She is ok, for a teacher/ we have great tutor who really cares/ he is a very nice person) didn't perceive him/her as a causative factor in establishing class climate. What is interesting, is that the students who appreciated their tutors described them as being exceptions to the rule.

*It's weird but our tutor is a really nice guy. Unlike all other teachers. Zbyszek*

On the other hand twenty-two students declared that they would like to have closer contact with the tutor. Question: "What would you like to change in your school?" received seventeen statements saying that students would like to be able to talk to the tutor about personal and class problems; ten saying that they would like the tutor to be on their side during conflicts with other teachers; five saying that the tutor should care more for each individual student, and nineteen saying that students needed the possibility to contact their tutor outside of the school context.

*I would like to feel that we are important for her (tutor). Beata*

*Sometimes I want to tell her something but I can't because the others are watching. They would think that I am a snitch. Lena*

Teachers agreed that a supportive atmosphere in the class is crucial for students and teachers, they also emphasised that group processes especially when it comes to students' inclusion and exclusion might be fateful and predominant. In their opinion, middle school students are very eager when judging and evaluating others which accelerates social categorisation and may lead to negative interactions within the class. Some negative manifestations of group dynamics mentioned by 21 teachers were: aggressors taking over the role of class leaders, students being treated as scapegoats and small groups of students fighting with each other. Those groups are composed of students who are similar; for example wear the same kind of clothes or are from wealthy families. They rarely let other students in.

*Aggressors are very vulgar and strong. They often intimidate other students and impose their decisions who can be liked and who cannot. W.R.*

Twenty psychologists agreed that negative leaders can spoil the atmosphere in a class as they force divisions and try to control other students' actions. They chose students to be excluded, elicit conflicts and make the tutor's life difficult. Fourteen responders pointed at the possibility of convincing a negative leader to cooperate with the tutor for the common good of the class.

*If a tutor is clever enough he will get a star (negative leader) to work for him. Extremely difficult but possible. M.S.I*

Teachers find it very difficult (10 teachers) or impossible (4 teachers) to manage group processes or prevent negative occurrences as they don't feel support, don't have enough time, experience or instruments for effective action. In their opinion class climate depends mainly on the composition of students who enter the class in September. Ten teachers (5 from public school, 3 from independent school and 2 from the school of fine art) admitted being involved in interpersonal class processes with very positive effects.

*If you are all alone against your boss, parents and who else you don't really feel like tilting at windmills. B.B.*

*If you are strict but friendly and have a plan you will always end up with a good, comprehensive class. But it took me years and years to master. K.K.*

One of the interviewed psychologists indicated that the classroom is a relatively stable environment to which students are exposed on a daily basis. They spend the majority of their day with classmates at school, this is a primary context in which peer relations take place – climate of the classroom may affect children's academic achievement, peer relation, attitude to learning and well-being.

According to psychologists/pedagogues it is the tutor's role to detect students' problem and act before class roles are established. The tutor should also be sensitive to the dynamics of students' relations with one another and incorporate daily practice of resolving any interpersonal problems. Psychologists state that this is rarely the case because most tutors/teachers who are specialists in their subjects have neither the skills nor the abilities to manage intergroup processes and they do not spend enough time with their class. Psychologists notice that there are cases in which teachers consider middle school students mature enough to take group matters into their own hands.

*Are teachers aware of group processes? M.W. I think they are not. They just let it happen. K.K.*

Interviewed teachers confirmed that there is no formal preparation for the tutor's role, during studies, so the competence is acquired through practice. The youngest teacher said that he is very apprehensive about signing the tutors contract because of his inexperience.

*It scares the hell out of me. I can teach maths and prepare for exams but how can I deal with a class full of thirteen years old with their endless problems, frustrations and quarrels. A.O.*

### Excluding/bullying behaviours

Students/teachers/psychologists agreed that exclusion occurs in a passive manner, for longer duration with acts of victimisation and bullying (at school and on the Internet) occurring with different frequency. Although most decisions about exclusion take place within first few initial weeks, some students may be excluded later on. All responders (Students from the school of fine arts declared that they know about those processes but it doesn't take place in their school) agreed that exclusion/inclusion process is very elaborate and undergoes continuous reviewing and renegotiating both at school and outside. Constant social comparisons are made, reassessed and evaluated, so students who are well integrated in the group may, because of unaccepted behaviour, be excluded from day to day. According to all interviewed students excluding behaviours can be very diverse and can take place during lessons (with and without teacher's presence), breaks and outside school. In their statements students didn't differentiate excluding behaviours, victimization and bullying, although for them exclusion comes before other bullying behaviours. Most students who are placed outside of the group are sooner or later bullied. Exclusion frequently begins with jokes and quite often doesn't go any further but sometimes continues reaching the state of isolating and victimising of the individual. Whether it goes that far on not depends on: the victim's reaction, teachers' response, and class emotional atmosphere. It is important to stress that all students from the school of fine arts declared that excluding behaviours and any form of victimisation are unacceptable at their school, it hardly ever happens but if it does, the aggressor is stigmatised and faces consequences. This situation is confirmed by the teachers who state that such situations are usually solved by the students themselves. Bullying or victimising is considered "uncool".

*It's not cool to bully or anything. We don't do that but I know that it happens in all other schools. Zuzia 1*

*We don't have problems of that kind. Of course it's not a paradise, we have lots of difficult situations at school but it's never bullying. Marek*

Students from independent, public, sport and catholic schools agreed on a list of excluding/bullying behaviours although students from independent school said that in their schools the acts of open violence are very rare. More indirect and subtle forms of behaviour are chosen. They also said that teachers never ignore negative interpersonal behaviours and present an attitude of zero tolerance. Students of public schools considered teachers' presence as a factor mitigating negative interpersonal behaviours only in case of open violence like fights or offence like stealing (when reported).

All interviewed students were able to quote a list of excluding/bullying behaviours. Independent and catholic

schools' students mentioned: nicknaming, meaningful glances, mocking, insulting, stopping the conversation when the person approaches, not informing about social events, gossiping, laughing at, humiliating, discouraging from participation in class events (school trips). Public school students supplemented the list adding: pushing, poking, threatening, hiding or destroying possessions, writing abusive signs, ridiculing, plotting against, gossiping, and physical aggression. All students, regardless of the school mentioned hostile acts on the Internet. Although according to the students, there are numerous ways to show reluctance and contempt on the Internet, only one example was given - namely excluding a given individual from the class facebook group.

*I've heard that in some schools girls gossip that somebody is a slut or that some girl has sex with a lot of guys. She had to change school. Basia*

*They poke, push, nick name, beat up. Sometimes they laugh when students says something during the lesson, Kasia*

*The simplest (way to exclude) is to throw somebody out from facebook group. Kamil*

All students are aware of negative consequences of excluding/bullying behaviours both on individual and class level. Among consequences students listed: sadness, fear, anger, loneliness, decrease in academic achievements, willingness to avoid school or change schools.

It is very significant that while talking about negative behaviours towards others, 23 students used passive voice, impersonal form or third person plural.

*They are poked at.../ Some students are bitten up/ It is normal to threaten some students..../ They wait after school and then make fun and ridicule.../ I've heard that poorer kids are bullied...*

When they were presented with their list of excluding/bullying behaviours and asked directly "Have you ever behaved like that?" nine students denied, four admitted to some forms of behaviours in the past, eleven said that they did it a few times but it wasn't serious and didn't bring any harm. Fifteen students explain the incidents of excluding behaviour with their involvement as harmless jokes or just joking with no intention to offend or hurt the individual.

Interviewed teachers/tutors describe bullying as the occurrence of deliberate aggressive acts physical, verbal or indirect in nature, which involve an imbalance of power making it difficult or impossible for the victim to defend themselves. For teachers, exclusion is one type of bullying and it happens when the individual is left out of class activities through direct refusals or any kind of indirect actions. Teachers stated that excluded children are easier to bully because they are alone without the support of peers. Bullying behaviours that follow exclusion are intended to confirm the initial act of marginalising and deepen the feeling of rejection. According to the teachers, the most dangerous are indirect forms of exclusion/bullying such as: all forms of ignoring, non-verbal gestures which suggest



rejection or condemnation, preventing the individual from joining any group activities, whispering behind their backs, gossiping, humiliating and all kinds of behaviours on the Internet.

*Sometimes I talk to the student who is decisively excluded from the class and he says that it is difficult to describe (other students behaviour). They whisper, make faces or become silent when he approaches. So he cannot complain to his teacher because they don't do anything wrong but at the same time make him feel outside the class. Z.N.*

According to all teachers social media, especially Facebook, have become a very efficient tool for excluding and bullying because the majority of social interactions are transferred there. They mention sending hateful emails or text messages, bullying in chat rooms or through instant messaging or websites, posting so-called "happy-slapping" where a victim's picture is circulated in internet; creating fake Facebook accounts of a person and posting processed pictures or made up comments.

*It's mostly about stupid comments and making fun of somebody. In the end this student gives up using Facebook and marginalisation goes even further. We cannot interfere, most often we don't even know what is going on. We can only presume and try to react, usually with no success whatsoever. L.P.*

*It's actually very sad that an instrument which was made to bring people together to make friends is used with such cruelty to oppress. D.Ż.*

Psychologists stated that the most destructive behaviours which have long lasting effect and serious consequences for the individual are indirect excluding/bullying actions taking place on the Internet. Peer victimisation has been a serious problem for years but the emergence of cyberbullying has cause it to escalate out of control. It is more dangerous than "normal" bullying because it can occur at any time, at any location and can reach more people. It is out also out of parents and educators control so aggressors avoid disciplinary actions and punishment. What is more, when students use anonymous forms of cyber violence they do not see immediate reactions of the victims and therefore do not realise consequences and inappropriateness of their actions.

*A victim is harassed at school. In the past he/she went home usually to safe environment. Now goes home to receive more harassment on the Internet. H.J.*

*Victims don't tell parents, don't tell teachers, don't tell us. A.H.*

Both teachers and psychologists agreed that students have knowledge on bullying behaviours and its consequences for individuals but they do not apply it when analysing or explaining their own behaviour.

*They know that purposeful ignoring makes the victim sad and depressed but if they ignore somebody it is just negligible detail. A.O.*

## Excluded students

All interviews confirmed that students considered uncool are those who stand out from the crowd, are different in some way from other members of peer group. At a general level all students (except fine arts students), teachers and psychologists agreed that certain behavioural and personality factors which contribute to setting students apart. Thus being calm and quiet, shy, introverted, not talkative or too talkative, expressing unpopular opinions, behaving in an embarrassing way, having different sense of humour or different taste in music.

*Difference would never be tolerated at school. It will always be stigmatised and eradicated. If you don't follow the rules you can't be in the group. Slawek*

*You can't stand it when somebody talks all the time. There are some rules after all. Marek*

Socially unattractive and prone to be excluded are those students who have poor social skills which was described as "strange, unpredictable behaviour." According to students such behaviour included: not keeping a secret, reporting class matters to the teachers (snitching), asking uneasy questions, telling not funny jokes or laughing at inappropriate moments and mentioning embarrassing or taboo topics.

*Sometimes you have to know when to shut up. That there are things you shouldn't say. He (the excluded boy) always says something wrong so we just avoid him. Karina*

Except "difference" or "strangeness" there are strong variations in what constitutes "being uncool". Extremely important for public schools boys seemed conformity to male roles of behaviour. Students (both girls and boys) reported that boys who behave in "gay manner" which is: having a lot of friends among girls, not conforming to strong and challenging forms of behaviour, being shy and not ready to rebel against authority and teachers, are often excluded and bullied. Independent school students mentioned "gay like" behaviour among other "strange" behaviours but unlike public school students they didn't pay any special attention to that particular aspect. Visual difference was significant for all interviewed students. In fine art school it was seen to be uncool to have scruffy clothes or shoes, having unclean appearance or sloppy hair, however students reported that it doesn't happen often because:

*There are only some kind of students attending our school. There is no need to explain that you should wash your hair in the morning. It's obvious. Pati*

Although in public and independent school appearance is important, there are significant distinctions in the perception of what is fashionable and right to wear. Wearing unfashionable or "wrong" clothes may be the reason for exclusion but it seems that it's not a self-evident factor and is usually combined with other excluding

features as “being different”. Students agreed that some unfashionable individuals may be cool if they present some other popular or desirable characteristics. Visual aspects which are beyond control, such as being fat marked students as outcasts in all types of school.

*If somebody is fat, he is screwed from the beginning. No matter what. Slawek*

Another important difference was the perception of engagement in school-work and extra curriculum activities. Thus being seen as working too hard and paying too much attention to school work was judged as extremely uncool within some of public schools, but was appreciated in independent, fine art and catholic school. The student from the sport school reported that in his school grades weren't important and attention was paid to sport skills.

*One of students in my class (independent school) is a really good student. It's ok but I know that if he were in some other school, he would have a very hard time. Piotrek*

Teachers confirmed the differences in exclusion patterns. The teachers at the school of fine arts declared that it wasn't a serious problem and happened only occasionally as it is fashionable to show independence and nonconformity among students. On the contrary, public school teachers considered exclusion as a major problem leading to bullying and victimisation. According to them, the students exclude those who are: sensitive (have problems tolerating rude behaviours, offensive jokes or name calling), shy, calm, withdrawn, introverted, hyperactive, too well-mannered, dirty and poor. They also mentioned informers (snitches) and boys who seem delicate and girly.

*The boys who were sensitive and not macho were excluded very quickly. M.W.1*

*In some groups it's not cool to be polite and calm. A.S.*

*The greatest problems is when a student complains to the teacher that something happened to him in the class, that some other student hurt him. If it becomes public, he is called a “snitch” and strong bullying usually takes place. R.W.*

Psychologists also stated that sensitive students are prone to exclusion because they take very seriously all comments and insinuations, feel resentful and as a consequence withdraw from interpersonal contact in order to avoid distress. The same pattern of withdrawal can be applied to students with low self-esteem who doubt their interpersonal skills. They are afraid of entering the group so every problem is considered a failure.

*Everybody is exposed to negative comments but some students just don't care much. On the other hand some can feel resentful for days and in that way he/she provokes more negative remarks. R.A.*

Teachers and psychologists agreed that attitude to school work and fashion depends on school criteria. In some schools, having fashionable clothes and the latest gadgets is a must (especially in independent and catholic) while in

others it's not very important. Good grades are welcomed in those classes where the majority of students are capable of reaching high academic standards or where the leader/star has good grades and imposes that attitude.

Two common features which lead to exclusion in both public and independent schools is being overweight and “different”. Teachers agree that being different is the main excluding factor and it is usually connected with poor social skills or/and not conforming to group norms. It is quickly spotted and stigmatised.

*Students are irritated by so-called strange behaviours as they don't know what to expect. They isolate the person and don't want to be around them. A.M.*

*Kids are ruthless. They won't take an explanation that somebody has a difficult situation or serious problems. E.W.*

*I have a feeling that they somehow sense this “difference” and react immediately. N.B.*

Psychologists emphasised that students often exclude those who don't have strong family support or come from dysfunctional or pathological families (often connected with poverty). Children who are victims at home often become scapegoats at school. They are unhappy, suppressed, tired so they are not able to stand up for themselves in a peer group. Those weaker individuals are quickly found by aggressors.

*Strong ones find the weak ones and play predator and its prey. T.K.*

Psychologists expressed their concerns with another excluding factor connected with sexuality. Group or girls who are more “advanced” in heterosexual relations (have boyfriends) and who are interested in sex victimise and bully those who aren't.

*We notice that girls are getting more and more aggressive mostly towards other girls. Those who declare being in romantic relationship with a boy and/or having sex oppress other girls who seem less experienced in sexual matters. B.T.*

## Discussion

The paper has explored several factors that lead to individual students being excluded from dominant peer groups in their middle school class, linking this to specific characteristics of transition moment, class atmosphere, teacher-student relation and students' perception of appearance, behaviours, abilities, personality and conformity to group or gender roles. Even though there are many strategic programs to reduce the incidence of bullying in Polish schools the problem remains unresolved and needs to be addressed. The results of WHO Cross-national Collaborative Study on health behaviour in school-aged children carried out in 2009-2011 revealed an upward trend in bullying incidents in Polish middle schools. Half of the students who participated in WHO research declared being involved in bullying as victim, aggressor or witness. Our findings also clearly show that exclusion and bullying

is a common occurrence for many of the middle school interviewed students. Although there were differences in exclusion pattern, form and intensity according to types of school, some notions didn't vary significantly. At a general level, students, teachers (with fine art school exception) and psychologists agreed that those who stand out from the crowd and are labelled "different" would most likely be excluded and victimised. Whilst poor social skills, overweight and certain behaviour/ personality factors were areas which students highlighted as causing exclusion from dominant peer group both in independent and public schools, other exclusion factors as conformity to gender roles, following fashion and attitude to school work depended greatly on the composition and culture of groups in different schools.

With the noticeable rise of bullying (especially cyberbullying) in recent years presented in reports and students unequivocal statements about its instances, it seems imperative for educators to search for new, improved prevention/intervention programs. It is especially important when we look at shortcomings in the bullying prevention system in Polish middle schools described by Szymańska (2005). Incidental actions (taken only after the occurrence of violence and only for a limited period of time), maladjusted or externally imposed programs, instructors from other schools or institutions, do not contribute to successful prevention or intervention.

While many bullying-intervention programs have been reported as failures, some of brought measurable success as Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (2003). His key guidelines for teachers (Olweus, 1989, 2007) used also by Polish educators (Kołodziejczyk, 2004) were thoroughly evaluated in the USA (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003) showing average reduction of 20 to 70 percent in student reports of being bullied and bullying others. Although promising in the USA, it needs to be adapted to constantly changing conditions, trends and demographic characteristics of the school environment in Poland.

Meeting those needs we would like to suggest several innovations in the areas of: program timing, the tutor's role in creating the class emotional climate and perceived consequences of students' own excluding behaviours.

### **Program timing**

The presented findings indicate clearly that school transition is a crucial and very stressful moment for middle school students as they are aware of its challenges and long term consequences. The significance of the transition moment demonstrated itself in students' anxiety, fears and hopes connected with renegotiating peer relations, fitting into a favourable position in the class hierarchy and not being marginalised and excluded; teachers and psychologists worries associated with the occurrence of negative leaders, scapegoats and fighting groups. It was also considered challenging for tutors because of the rapid group dynamics which proved to be difficult to monitor and control. Although very stressful and difficult for all parties involved, the transition moment can bring multiple positive

outcomes because collective renegotiation of peer relations could provide students with an opportunity for positive contact with unfamiliar peers (Eccles et al., 1993; Pellegrini, 2002; Shell, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2014) which is especially important in Polish context as youth form permanent units for three years of middle school. We would suggest that intervention/prevention programs should be introduced at the very beginning of school year and continued for at least a few weeks. Appropriate implementation could help all students take advantage of the opportunity provided by the transition moment, especially those who are shy, have low self-esteem or had negative experience in primary school. Such well-timed intervention could also mitigate students' anxiety and fear connected with entering a new, unfamiliar peer group, slow down the process of exclusion and give students tools for creating supportive environment in their class. Reversing hierarchy process is very difficult so it seems reasonable to influence it before it becomes permanent.

### **Teacher's role in creating class emotional climate.**

The fact that school class emotional climate is crucial for the development of students' social skills (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008; Sendyk, 2001), their well-being (Dutkiewicz & Szpringer, 2007) and academic achievement (Reyes, et al., 2012) is well supported in literature. Many researchers (Avant, Gazelle & Faldowski, 2011; Gazelle, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2005) hold the position that class climate (understood as positive affective tone of multidirectional interactions among teachers and students) may result when teacher promotes mutual respect and introduces an atmosphere of understanding and inclusion. Research on elementary and middle school students has documented significant relations of students' perception of support from teachers with educational aspirations, intrinsic values and self-concept (Pianta et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1998).

The presented findings are consistent with investigations which document the paramount importance of class emotional climate for students and school staff but give mixed evidence of how the class tutor's role in creating class emotional climate is perceived. Students don't see their tutor as a causative factor of class climate because he/she is identified as an outgroup member without insight into class life, problems and issues. At the same time, however, students declare the need for better, more personalised contact with their tutors, want their care, attention and support. Most teachers find it difficult or impossible to manage group dynamics due to its pace, their lack of time, tools or experience. Psychologists see the significance of the tutor's role in incorporating practice and action to resolve interpersonal problems but also realise their limitations.

We would, therefore, suggest that tutors need to empower students in their creation of a supportive class by giving them tools, showing them their efficacy and decisiveness.

Students' knowledge about group dynamics, hierarchy formation, excluding behaviours and their consequences allows us to assume that with tutor guidance,



support and implicit suggestions middle school students are able to form supportive classroom with a positive, satisfying climate of mutual trust. Imposing solutions or giving ready procedures may bring opposite results as students don't recognise teachers' efficacy in class relation management. This attitude was presented in Tłuściak-Deliowska research conducted in Polish schools. Her findings show that only one in five witnesses in bullying reported the occurrence to the teacher and that students don't perceive that their relations with teachers are based on partnership.

Tutors who find the management of class dynamics challenging need to be provided with professional-development opportunities and easy applicable tool (intervention/prevention program) which would enhance skills in empowering students, encouraging interpersonal contact in order to solve potential problems and establishing suitable, student-teacher connectedness. Taking under consideration the fact that students declare the need to contact their tutor without other students around (this could be considered as informing) it would be important to create an environment where talking or writing to a teacher feels safe.

Allen (2010) suggests the use of reporting form offering anonymity for students while Novic and Isaacs (2010) emphasise the need to advise students about the consequences of not coming forward when there is a problem.

### Perceived consequences of students' own excluding behaviours.

Current results demonstrate that although students do not distinguish excluding behaviours from other forms of bullying, they explicitly state that rejection increases the possibility of victimisation. Also, teachers and psychologists consider exclusion as imperative for later victimisation which seems in agreement with social identity and categorisation theories as well as with impressive numbers of experiments supporting the assumption that the mere fact of categorising people as out-group members is sufficient enough to trigger intergroup discrimination (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner, 1985).

Excluding and bullying behaviours are perceived by students in a dichotomous way: they have rich, theoretical knowledge on forms of bullying behaviours, their immediate and long-term negative consequences but at the same time they don't perceive their own excluding behaviours (although identical with the ones previously listed) as in any way harmful. Teachers and psychologist confirmed that students don't realise the consequences of their excluding bullying behaviours especially those on the Internet as an emotional reaction of the victim isn't immediately noticeable. It is therefore crucial to provide students with activities, exercises which would assist them in connecting their own behaviours with potential negative consequences for the victimised individual. According to the interviewed psychologists, the realisation of doing harm could hold back at least some excluding acts.

Taken together, the summary of qualitative data

evidence presented in this article indicates that rejection, exclusion and victimisation occur in Polish middle schools. It also shows an increase in cyberbullying which is particularly dangerous as it: cannot be controlled, can happen at any time or location, and has a much greater range than direct bullying at school. Schools and teachers have a responsibility to prevent the rejection and exclusion of individual students from the dominant group. If this process is slowed down, students may have more time for interpersonal relations which can decrease the number of those considered as outside the group or bullied. More importantly, this responsibility shouldn't reflect only in the rhetoric of inclusivity, tolerance and brotherly love but rather in engaging fully in the creation of a positive environment and implementation of effective programs. Such programs should utilise all the possibilities given by group processes, students' needs and the role teachers/tutors. It is certainly necessary to give students a clear message on the rules and sanctions related to bullying, establish authority, respond quickly when bullying occurs, provide opportunities for reporting and discussing bullying and create positive environment (Morgan, 2012; Olweus, 1993). This strategy, along with a well-prepared and well-timed intervention program, could lead to a better school environment which discourages bullying and victimisation. The next step of presented project is to design, evaluate and implement an educational intervention which would prevent exclusion and alleviate bullying behaviours. Although we hope that data obtained in presented study will contribute to success of the intervention, we realise that further work is needed to determine efficient ways of mitigating bullying and helping schools implement efficient strategies to create a positive school climate which would decrease the occurrence of bullying.

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