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Social Distance Towards Students Belonging to Certain Groups

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper was to determine the social distance of students towards certain groups. The subjects of this research were high school students (N-3999). The respondents expressed the greatest social distance towards students of Roma nationality, and the smallest towards students of Croatian nationality. Gender differences in social distance found in students who expressed greater social distance towards students of Serbian nationality. In order to improve comprehensive social practice related to the problem of social exclusion of children and young people, it is necessary to additionally empower experts and educational workers and create guidelines for better practice.*

Keywords: *education; quality of peer relationships, peer violence, poverty, social exclusion upbringing.*

Introduction

Children are an increasingly vulnerable segment of society because they become part of social distance and exclusion in schools, therefore this stands out as a significant problem in society and indicates the need for more extensive research into it. The quality of peer relationships has a positive correlation with generally accepted stereotypes and prejudices in the family and society in which the child lives. The stereotype and prejudice adopted in the family is often brought into the school environment and becomes the leading norm for the behavior of students towards their peers. They can lead to weaker communication between individual student groups, but also to social distance and exclusion of students from peer groups. Without early detection of this problem, it can be the reason for the appearance of some forms of violence. Social distance towards students belonging to certain groups is becoming more prevalent in educational institutions. The child wants to belong to a school group in order to feel comfortable at school, achieve better academic achievements, strengthen his self-confidence, and achieve better social integration with his peer group. Norms refer to the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of certain groups (Nesadale, 2011, Oppenheimer, 2011). Therefore, these generally accepted norms in the family, schools, and society lead to the exclusion or inclusion of certain groups or individuals in schools. Bubonya and Cobb-Clark (2021), emphasize the intergenerational transmission of prejudices in the family, which may lead to social distance and exclusion. It is considered that social support is needed for families at risk of poverty because it contributes to the emotional well-being of the child, and alleviates his coping with stress, but also indicates the importance of their social role in society. A child needs positive experience and support from parents, extended family members, peers, experts who are essential for his socio-emotional development. Lampert et al. (2020), state the correlation of the financial situation in the family and the social distance in the class towards students who come from financially disadvantaged families. These authors consider social distance as a reason for exclusion, mockery and violence among peers. When reducing and mitigating social distance in school, an important factor is the teacher who encourages students to grow and develop and achieve academic achievements, transforming their students into independent and mature individuals (McCuaig et al., 2020). According to research in Norwegian schools, students from poor financial status are more exposed to discrimination than students from better status. (Corral-Granadosa et al., 2023)

Research Results

A total of 399 students participated in the research, of which 148 (37.1%) were male and 251 (62.9%) were female. The largest number of students was from the gymnasium (n=200; 50.1%), followed by the secondary tourism school (n=103; 25.8%) and the economic school (n=96; 24.1%). The aim of this work was to determine the social distance towards students belonging to certain groups. The research task was to investigate students' attitudes towards student groups. The hypothesis of this research is: It is assumed that students have a social distance towards students belonging to certain groups (Roma, students of Serbian nationality, students of Croatian nationality, poor students, students with special needs and students with behavioral problems. This work is part of research on peer violence

, conflicts among students and procedures for solving them. The instrument used was taken from the research *Violence leaves traces* conducted by the Center for Peace Studies. The respondents filled out the above-mentioned instrument during the class community lesson. The research was carried out with prior consent and agreement with the management selected schools. **Presentation of social distance according to members of individual groups** Respondents were offered statements (To be your best friend, To be your friend, To sit with you on the bench, To go to your class, To go to your school, To live on your street, To live in your city), and offered are groups from which they could choose and connect with the statements: The first group offered were students of Croatian nationality, from which the majority of respondents come, so they had the smallest social distance towards members of this group. The statement To be your best friend was chosen by 219 (54.9 %), and 95 (23.8%) respondents chose the statement To be your friend, 37 (9.3 %) chose the statement To sit with you on the bench . The statement That he goes to your school and goes to your class was chosen by 24 (6.1%) respondents. Poor students are the second offered group for which the statement To be your best friend was chosen by 190 (47.6%) respondents, and the statement To be your friend was chosen by 137 (34.3%). The least number of students, 10 (2.6%) of the respondents, decided to go to your school and live in your street. 190 (47.6%) respondents decided to be best friends with students whose parents are divorced, and 105 (26.3%) respondents decided to be their friends. The fewest respondents opted for the statement that they go to your school and live in your street 10 (2.6%). For the Roma group, 83 (20.8%) of the respondents chose the statement To be your best friend, and the statement To sit with you in the bench was chosen by 60 (15%) of the respondents. Students with behavioral problems got the least for the statement To be your best friend, 58 (14.5 %), and the statement To go to your school was chosen by 32 (8 %) respondents. Students show the greatest social distance towards Roma students and students with behavioral problems. They show the smallest social distance towards pupils of Croatian nationality, poor pupils and pupils whose parents are divorced. According to research results (Tomašić Hamer, J., Milić 2017), students show the greatest social distance towards Roma students. In contrast, research by Šlezak (2022) found large regional differences in the expression of social distance between Roma living in different parts of Croatia. A significant level of mutual social distance towards Croats as the bearers of the majority society was measured. According to the results obtained by Šeatović (2022), the social distance of special education students towards people with intellectual disabilities was determined to a greater extent among students of lower years of study compared to students of final studies. Mrnjauš (2013), according to research findings on a sample of pedagogy and cultural studies students, a greater social distance towards members of certain groups was found among pedagogy students compared to cultural studies students.

Table 1

Gender differences in social distance

		To be your best friend	To be your friend	To sit with you in the bench	To go in your class	To go into your school	To live in your street	That lives in your city	χ^2	p
Students of Croatian nationality	M	80 (54,1)	33 (22,3)	14 (9,5)	9 (6,1)		3 (2,0)	7 (4,7)	0,222	0,974
	Ž	139 (55,4)	62 (24,7)	23 (9,2)	14 (5,6)	1 (0,4)	6 (2,4)	4 (1,6)		
Students of Serbian nationality	M	53 (35,8)	38 (25,7)	1 (0,7)	21 (14,2)	7 (4,7)	3 (2,0)	23 (15,5)	19,677	0,001*
	Ž	104 (41,4)	81 (32,3)	14 (5,6)	23 (9,2)	5 (2,0)	3 (1,2)	17 (6,8)		
Students with behavioral problems	M	21 (14,2)	34 (23,0)	17 (11,5)	32 (21,6)	17 (11,5)	8 (5,4)	17 (11,5)	7,123	0,309
	Ž	37 (14,7)	73 (29,1)	26 (10,4)	64 (25,5)	15 (6,0)	14 (5,6)	19 (7,6)		

Statistically significant gender differences in social distance towards Serbian students were found, where male students show significantly greater social distance towards Serbian students than female students. Gender differences in social distance towards other groups did not prove to be statistically significant.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to point out the increasing social distance and exclusion of children and young people and highlight it as a significant social, political, economic and educational problem. This research assumed that students have a social distance towards certain groups. The results showed that students have a greater social distance towards students of Serbian nationality and Roma. Female students showed a higher degree of tolerance towards the mentioned groups compared to male students. The shortcoming of this research is the small sample. The recommendation for research on this topic is to expand it to a representative sample in order to determine the actual state of social distance among students according to individual groups. Social exclusion is becoming an increasingly topical issue in developed European countries, but also in transition countries. Some authors consider social exclusion to be one of the most significant problems of modern times. In order to improve the overall social practice with regard to the problem of social exclusion of children and young people, it is necessary to further strengthen experts, as well as educational workers who meet children and young people every day. Also, it is necessary to strengthen local initiatives that can serve as examples of good practice, improve educational programs and create guidelines for better practice. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of experts so that they are ready to critically monitor numerous social and legislative

changes and find in them an opportunity for the necessary improvements in the comprehensive social response to the problem of social exclusion.

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