

Correspondence from Professor Christina Salmivalli, Tuesday, 6 Feb 2024

Subject of Correspondence: Response to Paul Downes's submission on the 8th of June 2021 (KiVa Antibullying Program)

Correspondence to Paul Kehoe TD, Chairperson of the Irish Joint Oireachtas (Parliament and Senate) Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Ms. Tara Kelly for dissemination to the Joint Oireachtas Education Committee, cc'd to Professor Paul Downes

Dear Mr Kehoe and Mrs. Kelly

As it has come to my attention that Dr. Paul Downes from Dublin City University has questioned the "bystander approach" utilized in the KiVa anti-bullying program ([www.kivaprogram.net](http://www.kivaprogram.net)) and expressed his concerns in the Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on June 8th, 2021, I felt necessary to clarify the following:

KiVa Antibullying Program, also utilized in Irish schools, is strongly evidence-based – it has actually been studied more than any other bullying prevention program anywhere in the world. KiVa is based on the view that bullying is a group phenomenon, often reinforced by bystanders who provide bullying children with social rewards or do nothing to help peers who are targeted by bullying.

Research has shown that bystanders' responses to bullying have an impact on the level of bullying in classrooms. In other words, there is less bullying in classrooms where students do not reinforce the bullies' behaviors but instead support those who are victimized (Nocentini et al., 2013; Salmivalli et al., 2011). Bystander responses also have an impact on whether or not at-risk children end up being victimized (Kärnä et al., 2010) or bullying others (Pan et al., 2023).

Unlike sometimes stated (and also suspected by Dr. Downes), defending does not lead to an increased risk for victimization (Malamut et al., 2022) – quite the contrary, it leads to increases in peer status (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2023), so it is beneficial not only for children who are defended and supported but also for those defending them.

It is quite surprising to hear that encouraging students to help and support those who are vulnerable and victimized is, according to Dr. Downes, problematic. In our view, it is a core citizen skill that should be reinforced in the society. In the KiVa Program, students are not encouraged to take social risks or aggressively attack the bullies. Instead, defending and helping peers who are victimized might mean sitting together with them in the lunchroom; walking home from school together; telling there is nothing wrong with them; just being kind to them. In the KiVa lessons, teachers discuss with students about good ways to help someone who is victimized, lonely, or finds it difficult to fit in the group.

Downes also refers to a meta-analysis from more than 10 years ago (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012), where it was found that "work with peers" was not an effective element of anti-bullying programs, but could actually make things worse. However, in

that meta-analysis, “work with peers” meant formal peer support schemes, as in peer mentoring or peer mediation. There is indeed very little (if any) evidence of such schemes being helpful. However, encouraging peer bystanders to show that they are against bullying, which is a key element in the KiVa program, does not imply assigning peers any formal “peer helper” role. Our study has shown that changing bystander responses is an important working mechanism of the KiVa program: in schools where KiVa is implemented, students start showing more constructive bystander behaviors which, in turn, leads to decreases in bullying behavior. The more students observe defending of victimized peers among their classmates, the more they are likely to reduce their own bullying behavior (Saarento et al., 2015).

The effectiveness of the KiVa program has been studied in many countries (Finland, Estonia, Italy, the Netherlands, UK) and it is without any doubt among the most effective bullying prevention programs. KiVa has also led to various positive effects in Ireland, where schools implementing the program are experiencing an improved class atmosphere, increased feeling of safety when coming to school, and overall sense of shared responsibility in the school community. As a matter of fact, the feedback from the schools has been consistently positive, and KiVa program has never been raised to be problematic for children in any way. KiVa supports the social and emotional development of students whilst providing a protective support framework in place. Furthermore, after the schools have intervened in bullying, 66 % of the bullying students report that they have either bullied less or stopped bullying completely, and 90 % of bullied students report that since the KiVa intervention they have been bullied less or the bullying has stopped completely. Also, the prevalence of victimization in the Irish KiVa schools has dropped from 22 % in the year 2018 to 14 % in 2023.

Kind Greetings,

Christina Salmivalli, PhD  
Professor of psychology  
University of Turku, Finland  
tel. +358-400-995473  
Publicum building, 4th floor, room 426  
\*\*\*\*\*

INVEST research flagship:  
<https://sites.utu.fi/invest/>

ERC Advanced Grant –funded CHALLENGE-project (2020-2025):  
<https://sites.utu.fi/challenge/en/>  
<https://sites.utu.fi/challenge/fi/>

KiVa antibullying program:  
[www.kivaprogram.net](http://www.kivaprogram.net)  
[www.kivakoulu.fi](http://www.kivakoulu.fi)

Correspondence Response from Professor Paul Downes, Friday, 9 Feb 2024

Correspondence to Professor Salmivalli, Paul Kehoe TD, Chairperson of the Irish Joint Oireachtas (Parliament and Senate) Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Ms. Tara Kelly for dissemination to the Joint Oireachtas Education Committee

Subject: Re: Response to Paul Downes's submission on the 8th of June 2021 (KiVa Antibullying Program)

Dear Colleagues,

Our report published by the European Commission 2016 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3fb78afb-c03d-11e6-a6db-01aa75ed71a1> and Journal of School Violence article 2019 (attached) recognised a range of strengths in the KiVA model led by Dr. Salmivalli, while focusing in detail on one particular aspect of serious concern, namely, its promoting of peer 'defenders' to 'challenge' the bullying perpetrator (see pp.52-56).

To briefly summarise some of these longstanding concerns:

- schools actively encouraging students as peer 'defenders' to 'challenge' the bullying perpetrator risk being sued for negligence, as it is reasonably foreseeable that the perpetrator may retaliate against such a defender leading to the 'defender' becoming a victim of bullying, with associated short-term and long-term harm to their mental, physical health and/or educational engagement. Among the concerns Ttofi and Farrington's (2012) review raise with peer defenders intervening, 'peer interventions may reinforce the aggressive behaviour of school bullies and promote a cycle of violence' (p.456).
- the psychological framework of motivation relied on by Dr. Salmivalli and KiVa treats bullying solely in terms of social approval. This overlooks many other motivations for bullying by an entrenched bullying perpetrator, including prior trauma. KiVa does not adequately differentiate different levels of need and motivation in the bullying perpetrator.
- The KiVa peer defenders model does not treat students' declared fears of defending the victim and challenging the bullying perpetrator as a rational response to threat that they may also be bullied if challenging the perpetrator. Issues of self-protection (Bellmore et al., 2012), including fear of consequences of intervening (Rigby and Johnson, 2005; Thornberg 2007; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012) have been identified by students regarding why they did not defend a victim of bullying.
- It looks to the aggregate level of impact but not the disproportionate risk to individuals.

Against the backdrop of these concerns, Dr. Salmivalli's clarifications in her message below, regarding current models of KiVa, are hugely welcome if, as I understand from the examples provided, KiVa's sole focus is on peer support for victims and not to 'challenge' to 'defend' against the bullying perpetrator. All of the examples Dr. Salmivalli gives in her clarification "helping peers who are victimized might mean sitting together with them in the lunchroom; walking home from school together;

telling there is nothing wrong with them; just being kind to them." are regarding peer support rather than active defending/challenging the perpetrator.

Our documents above clearly distinguish between these kinds of examples of supports to peers who are victimized, including not reinforcing the perpetrator's behaviour, on the one hand, and direct 'challenge' to peer 'defenders', recognising that the former are very important and safe, while the latter are very problematic

As I understand from this response, Dr. Salmivalli is providing a categorical assurance that the current KiVa programme does not engage in peer challenging approaches regarding the bullying perpetrator, and that the term peer defender really means peer support/supporter rather than any active defending process against the bullying perpetrator to be fostered by bystanders/peers. This clarification is to be greatly welcomed.

While the examples of peer support provided by Dr. Salmivalli in her response are all fine, it is notable that the language of peer 'defenders/defending' is still being used. Beyond the examples of peer support provided by Dr. Salmivalli in her response, it would be very helpful if she could further clarify what 'defending' adds here beyond the peer support examples. So for this statement given, "In the KiVa Program, students are not encouraged to take social risks or aggressively attack the bullies.", it would be helpful if Dr. Salmivalli could further clarify that defending does not mean 'challenge' the bully perpetrators directly - her wording may leave open the interpretation that KiVa is still encouraging students to confront the bullying perpetrator (in a nonaggressive way) ? If it is, the concerns with negligence issues raised above and in our publications would still apply.

More generally, another of our EU Commission published reports 2018 on Social and Emotional Education [https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/AR3\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/AR3_Full-Report.pdf) foregrounds the need for students' voices (and fears) to be heard and not dismissed. Both of these reports are happy to support other peer related support aspects Dr. Salmivalli refers to and that take place in KiVa. Peer aspects are obviously important for a positive school climate for students' social and emotional development but not the extreme peer defenders/challengers model that as I understand and hope, Dr. Salmivalli is distancing KiVa from. Having said this, there is also a need for other supports, beyond peers, for those experiencing bullying (including the perpetrators) given the serious long-term risks associated with bullying documented in our 2016 EU Commission report.

Beyond the issue of other supports, our EU Commission report also points to the benefits of parent related engagement for bullying prevention that is strongly supported in the research literature and is a feature of other international bullying prevention programs, such as Cross et al.'s Australian models. It would be great to see in future iterations of KiVa a family dimension, as a KiVa plus type model.

With best wishes,  
Paul

Professor Paul Downes  
Professor of Psychology of Education,

Director, Educational Disadvantage Centre,  
School of Human Development,  
Institute of Education,  
St. Patrick's Campus,  
Drumcondra  
Dublin City University,  
Dublin 9  
Ireland

Ph: [+353 1 7009245](tel:+35317009245)

[https://www.dcu.ie/human\\_development/people/paul-downes.shtml](https://www.dcu.ie/human_development/people/paul-downes.shtml)

Affiliate Professor, University of Malta, Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health

#### Recent Publications:

Downes, P., Li, G., Van Praag, L. & Lamb, S. (Eds.) (2024). *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education*. London: Routledge

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-International-Handbook-of-Equity-and-Inclusion-in-Education/Downes-Li-Praag-Lamb/p/book/978>

Downes, P. (2020) *Reconstructing agency in developmental and educational psychology: Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space*. New York/London/New Delhi: Routledge

<https://www.routledge.com/Reconstructing-Agency-in-Developmental-and-Educational-Psychology-Inclusive/Downes/p/book/9781138158856>

Downes, P. (2020). *Concentric Space as a Life Principle Beyond Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur: Inclusion of the Other*. New York/London/New Delhi: Routledge

<https://www.routledge.com/Concentric-Space-as-a-Life-Principle-Beyond-Schopenhauer-Nietzsche-and/Downes/p/book/9781138306936>

Downes, P., Anderson, J., Behtoui, A., Van Praag, L. (Eds.), (2024). *Promoting Inclusive Systems for Migrants in Education*. London: Routledge

<https://www.routledge.com/Promoting-Inclusive-Systems-for-Migrants-in-Education/Downes-Anderson-Behtoui-Van-Praag/p/book/9781032193045>