

## Article

# Supporting the Five Cs of Positive Youth Development Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Impact on Adolescents' Bullying Behaviour

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**Abstract:** Tailored interventions within the school context can promote the Five Cs of positive youth development—competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection—thus aiding in mitigating behaviours such as bullying. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of tailored interventions targeting each of the Five Cs and its indirect impact on bullying and victimisation during school closures. The sample comprised 66 students in four experimental groups (general, technical, vocational, and short vocational school) and 47 students in two control groups (general and vocational). Each experimental group was analysed separately, considering the specific contextual needs of each. Results varied across groups: competence, character, and caring remained unchanged post-intervention, while connection increased in the experimental group from general school, and confidence decreased in the experimental groups from technical and vocational schools. When compared to control groups from each school, experimental groups from general and vocational schools had higher connection and experimental group from general school had lower competence than control group from the same school. Bullying outcomes showed a decrease in verbal bullying and victimisation in the experimental group from general school, an increase in cyberbullying in the experimental group from short vocational school, and a decrease in social bullying in the experimental group from general school. The study suggests that brief interventions can positively influence aspects of the Five Cs, impacting bullying and victimisation outcomes.

**Keywords:** positive youth development; bullying; intervention; the Five Cs



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## 1. Introduction

Within developmental psychology, researchers initially focused on minimising risk behaviour (e.g., substance abuse, bullying). However, after they directed their focus toward exploring the strengths of adolescents, it was recognised that only the prevention of problematic behaviour is insufficient for fostering the optimal development of adolescents [1]. Thus, it is evident that providing conditions for the development of youth's potential and addressing weaker areas, while simultaneously enhancing their strengths, is crucial. Positive youth development is successfully fostered when a key component of the relational developmental system is ensured [2]. This involves creating a supportive environment that facilitates reciprocal coactions between an individual's internal and external assets within their environment. In interventions, promoting positive youth development, actively engaging youth in the intervention process, and offering diverse activities for their development are pivotal [3,4]. Additionally, gaining extensive information about the youth involved in the programme and their contextual backgrounds allows for a higher degree of intervention contextualisation [1]. All mentioned characteristics can further improve intervention outcomes and even have a spill-over effect on other domains of youth's lives (e.g., reducing bullying involvement).

Although a wide array of interventions aimed at fostering positive youth development exists, there is a notable scarcity of research evaluating the efficacy of these programmes through the measurement of the Five Cs of positive youth development (PYD), such as

competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection [5]. To date, the Five Cs have been used as programme success indicators in three different studies [5–7]. However, these studies have employed various questionnaires for measuring PYD (e.g., Positive Youth Development Inventory [8]) and none of the studies used the most established measure of the Five Cs of PYD (i.e., short version of PYD questionnaire [9]).

The aim of the present study is to address these research gaps based on the guidelines for the development and implementation of interventions promoting PYD. This involves (1) the development and implementation of a contextualised intervention amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which was tailored to the actual state of the Five Cs in the classroom, while actively involving students in programme planning; (2) evaluating the overall intervention's effect on the Five Cs using a recognised measure of PYD [9]; (3) examining the intervention's indirect effect on the occurrence of bullying and victimisation.

### *1.1. Interventions for Supporting Positive Youth Development and Their Impact on the Five Cs of PYD*

The aim of promoting PYD through interventions is to support adolescents to be more competent, confident, connected, and caring and to have higher levels of moral judgement [10], which has an impact on both supporting positive behaviour and reducing undesirable behaviour. Effective PYD interventions should optimise the relationship between the individual's potentials and their internal and external assets [11]. Although empirical findings from a number of studies in the US support the PYD paradigm, particularly the presence of the Five Cs [12], guidelines for implementing prevention or intervention programmes to promote positive youth development are only broadly defined [13].

Interventions designed to foster positive development should be based on optimistic expectations, asserting that all young individuals have the potential for optimal development [3]. These interventions should essentially include the following: concern for physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to develop belonging, positive social norms, support for efficacy, opportunities to develop competence, and integration of family, school, and community efforts [14]. Lerner [4] has highlighted the interplay between the internal assets of the individuals involved in the interventions and the assets of the different contexts to which the youth belong to, as a key component for the effective implementation of positive youth development programmes. Lerner (Big three curricular features [4]) and Roth and Brooks-Gunn [15] outlined very similar general guidelines for effective interventions to promote PYD, which are here combined due to the large overlap in the content: (1) ensuring intervention goals are met, such as achieving the Five Cs through activities that develop important life skills; (2) providing opportunities for youth in different contexts (e.g., at school, at home or in their community) to develop their interests and competences as participants and as leaders of family, school, and community activities; (3) creating a supportive environment in which adolescents can develop a good relationship with the intervention leaders and other participants, which may last for a longer period of time, even after the program.

Youth's active engagement in the intervention [3] is also essential, aligning with the aim of interventions to empower the youth. This can be achieved through their active involvement in selecting activities and taking responsibility, e.g., as leaders of family, school, and community activities [4]. Additionally, researchers are encouraged to obtain as much information as possible about the individuals who will be involved in the intervention and the contexts to which they belong, e.g., family, peers, school, community, before designing the intervention [1]. This comprehensive understanding allows for a high degree of tailoring of the intervention. The reciprocal relationship between the adolescent's engagement in the programme and his/her contexts is pivotal, as contexts and the adolescent's experiences in these contexts can influence whether he/she participates in the programme (i.e., if they have consent to participate) and whether the programme will be successful. In addition, programme participation may contribute to the improvement of an individual's relationships with peers or family [16].

Diverse interventions designed to foster PYD exhibit variations in themes, delivery methods, durations, and evaluated outcomes [17]. Past literature reviews have encompassed programmes successful in cultivating emotional and social competencies [18], mitigating violence outcomes [19], promoting physical activity among youth [20,21], and fostering leadership and mentoring among young individuals [22]. Notably, fostering emotional and social competencies has demonstrated enduring effects in improving skills, positive attitudes, prosocial behaviour, and academic performance. Additionally, these programmes can act as a protective factor over time against internalising and externalising problems (e.g., behavioural and emotional issues [18]). Interventions geared towards promoting PYD can be categorised into those that are implemented within the school context and those conducted outside of school, typically during the leisure activities. School-based interventions commonly target all students or specifically address those with less supportive backgrounds [23]. They are often delivered through structured modules within classrooms or through mentoring and sports-related activities within school clubs [22].

Researchers in the field of prevention science consistently emphasise the importance of employing measures directly linked to the theoretical underpinnings of interventions [24,25]. Despite the multitude of programmes focused on promoting PYD, the research examining the effectiveness of these programmes on indicators of PYD is scarce [25]. Among the most comprehensive longitudinal studies, the 4-H study conducted in the US, compared the overall score of the Five Cs between youth who participated in 4-H programmes and those who did not. The results indicated a discernible impact of the programmes on the overall score of Five Cs only in two generations [26]. Further review of the literature revealed only three experimental studies [5–7] that assessed effectiveness using various measures of PYD (various questionnaires for specific indicators and the Positive Youth Development Inventory [8]). These studies varied considerably, with one focusing on promoting youth participation in community forums and another on encouraging volunteering. White [7] conducted a study with 74 participants, of whom only 14 ( $M_{age} = 15.93$  years) participated in the intervention. The program, based on the curriculum of the Youth Participatory Evaluation: Building Skills for Youth Community Action [27], lasted 15 h and involved youth and adults. The programme aimed to promote youth engagement and covered areas such as youth–adult partnerships, community forums (developing social and communication skills, embracing diversity), learning scientific skills for better organisation, synthesising and analysing information (developing planning, decision-making, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills), planning community forums, recording and analysing community forums, interpreting data and designing plans. Results showed no within-individual or between-group differences in the Five Cs following the intervention. Kajokiene et al. [6] conducted a study with 613 participants, of which 351 participated in the intervention ( $M_{age} = 15.26$  years). The “Try Volunteering” programme comprised eight 45 min sessions, each dedicated to promoting one to three Cs through individual or group activities, such as group discussions, reflections, or role playing. The programme emphasised goal setting, the programme’s atmosphere (facilitators received a two-day training on how to deliver the programme, particularly how to foster positive relationships with participants), and the fulfilment of the criteria of programme activities by providing opportunities for developing new skills, enhancing existing ones, and facing real-life situations. Post-programme results indicated no differences in the Five Cs between the intervention and control groups, although within both groups, connection decreased. Furthermore, Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė et al. [5], using the same sample, found that employing latent growth modelling at the mean level showed no differences between the experimental and control groups after the intervention. However, there was a slight within-group difference in competence and confidence. After using latent class growth analysis, the majority of participants in the experimental group exhibited increased competence, connection, and caring, while character and confidence remained at similar levels. In the control group, competence, confidence, and character decreased, while connection and caring remained stable. The results of these studies are inconclusive and

there is an uncertainty about the effectiveness of interventions in addressing the Five Cs. This ambiguity is compounded by the diversity and purpose of the interventions, which were primarily designed to promote contribution (conceived as a sixth indicator of positive youth development), either in the form of youth involvement in community participation or voluntary activities.

Besides findings that competence, connection, and caring could be increased [5], researchers have found that interventions aiming to promote PYD can increase competence [28]. Since competence and confidence are interrelated, increased feelings of being competent may contribute to higher self-confidence [29]. Recent studies [30] have linked character and caring, which are mostly influenced by parents, teachers, and peers [31]. However, changes in both indicators involve longer programmes, processes, and activities in which young people are included [31,32]. Particularly in relation to caring, changes can be attributed to the general normative development of young people [33]. Although some programmes have shown positive effects on the development of empathy, the effects have been small [34]. This emphasises the need to develop and implement contextualised interventions that will incorporate the interplay between the individual and his or his context in the programme implementation while following suggested guidelines for successful PYD intervention to achieve changes in the Five Cs.

### *1.2. Interventions Promoting Positive Youth Development and Their Impact on Bullying and Victimisation*

The development of prevention science highlights the importance of promoting several competences and preventing problem behaviour, which must be integrated into interventions that promote the PYD [1]. This is because youth cannot be divided into groups exclusively targeted for PYD promotion or those solely focused on reducing problem behaviours. It is crucial to recognise that within each individual there is a coexistence of positive competences that need to be promoted and problem behaviours that need to be reduced. On the other hand, higher levels of the Five Cs in young people do not necessarily lead to a reduction in undesirable behaviour. This is supported by the findings of previous research where, for one group of young people, higher levels of the Five Cs were negatively associated with the occurrence of risky behaviours, while for another group of young people, increases in the Five Cs did not lead to a reduction in negative factors affecting youth development [35]. Similarly, the group of adolescents with high levels of positive youth development indicators also included those who engaged in risky behaviours [36]. Despite occasional conflicting findings, the promotion of PYD has shown positive effects on youth lives, including the reduction in bullying and victimisation. While research on bullying within the PYD framework is limited, researchers advocate for concurrently addressing youth's competences to reduce bullying behaviour [37]. Such an approach shifts the focus from merely addressing individuals engaged in or experiencing bullying towards recognising their strengths and potentials, utilising them to mitigate bullying behaviours. It is therefore the role of researchers and programme implementers to identify their sources of strengths, address them appropriately, and encourage those that are less present. Furthermore, PYD programmes aimed at reducing bullying should include opportunities to change the particular contexts to which youth belong, such as the classroom, school, family, and community [38].

Interventions aimed at reducing bullying within PYD programmes are scarce, as evidenced by meta-analyses and systematic reviews [19,39,40]. Existing research indicates positive short-term effects but lacks statistically significant long-term impacts on bullying [19] or that implemented programmes did not have an effect on reducing bullying behaviour [39]. Programmes integrating physical activities within PYD frameworks have shown promise in reducing bullying and victimisation by addressing various constructs defining youth development [40]. Furthermore, numerous programmes, rooted in paradigms within the broader positive youth development field, enter educational settings with the dual purpose of reducing bullying and fostering social and emotional learning,

e.g., Second Step [41], Roots of Empathy [42], P.A.T.H.S. [43], Taking The Lead [44], and CEPIDEA [45], with the latter three derived from the PYD paradigm. These programmes have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing bullying, aggression, and victimisation [43,44], emphasising the importance of promoting prosocial behaviour as a countermeasure to bullying [45]. Conversely, a meta-analysis of bullying reduction programmes highlighted that those that were not centred on socio-emotional skill development exhibited higher reductions in bullying and victimisation [46]. The effects of PYD programmes on bullying and victimisation are inconsistent, but this may be because programmes that are primarily aimed at reducing bullying are targeted at specific individuals who are at higher risk of engaging in bullying. Including only adolescents with higher levels of bullying in an intervention may lead to greater reductions in bullying than programmes targeting the whole classroom, as they report lower levels of aggressive behaviour in the classroom on average and interventions may therefore not have as large an impact [47].

Nevertheless, for PYD programmes with the secondary aim of reducing bullying and victimisation, active promotion of youth strengths that are aligned with various contexts (family, peers, school) is crucial. Researchers, schools, and programme implementers should look beyond the empirical outcome of the programme and assess effectiveness based on who benefits, under what conditions, and in what contexts [38]. Researchers highlight that participants in PYD programmes learn intentional self-regulation, which acts as a mechanism that leads to changes in bullying behaviour and contributes to positive outcomes. These positive outcomes can act as buffers or protective factors, reducing the influence of environmental risk factors, or through compensation, where youth engagement in bullying has fewer consequences or harmful effects [3]. In summary, while the PYD paradigm does not directly address bullying or victimisation, it can contribute to their reduction in educational settings by promoting the Five Cs.

### *1.3. Development, Contextualisation, and Implementation of an Intervention to Promote Positive Youth Development*

For the purpose of the present study, an intervention was designed and implemented to promote PYD among youth from less supportive backgrounds. In this study, we evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention. During the preparation and implementation, general recommendations from researchers [4,13] were followed, which relate to the design and implementation of interventions within the PYD framework. The development process of the intervention, its contextualisation based on the perceived strengths and potentials of the students, and its implementation are described below.

#### *1.3.1. Development of the Intervention*

When developing the intervention, established guidelines were followed, with particular focus on achieving intervention goals through various activities, providing opportunities for active participation, creating a supportive environment, and obtaining contextual information before intervention implementation [4,13]. Additionally, the programme was structured based on SAFE guidelines [48], emphasising that activities in the programme should be sequential, active, focused, and explicit.

The content of the intervention encompassed the promotion of all Five Cs, in line with findings that such interventions are lacking and recommendations for the preparation and implementation of positive youth development programmes [25]. Each planned session within the intervention aimed to improve a specific C; therefore, five workshops were conducted, each lasting 90 min, ensuring adherence to the guidelines that activities should be sequential [48]. This was achieved by linking activities in the programme and following a specific chronological sequence. The intervention content was partially prepared prior to the contextualisation, including a set of activities to promote each C and an outline of each workshop. In Table 1, objectives of each workshop are defined together with the example of the activity targeted at the specific C. Contents of the sessions were mostly derived from



other empirically supported programmes tested in the Slovenian context, such as the Hand in Hand programme [49] and the To sem jaz programme [50].

**Table 1.** Objectives of each session to improve the targeted Five Cs.

Workshop	Objective and Activity Example
Connection	Enhance connection among students and foster a positive attitude towards the school environment Activity: Same Side of the Road [51], in which students get to know their similarities and differences with others
Competence	Address competence as a positive opinion about actions in specific areas. Promote self-awareness of strengths of participants Activity: Identifying one's own positive qualities [50], which helped students to identify their qualities and provide examples of their characteristics, strengths, and competencies Strengthen positive identity and self-concept through promoting assertive behaviour
Confidence	Activity: Thinking more positively and realistically [50]—the aim of the activity was to focus students' attention on what they are thinking at the precise moment while also focusing on how thoughts, feeling, and behaviour are intertwined and influence our lives. Furthermore, the second aim was to identify negative thoughts about themselves and to replace them with more relevant or realistic ones Promote responsibility for one's own behaviour and the development of self-regulation
Character	Activity: Taking responsibility for one's action [50]—the aim was that students through discussion recognise that they are responsible for their actions, including short- and long-term consequences of their actions Promote the development of empathy, sympathy, and prosocial behaviour
Caring	Activity: Activation of bystanders—the aim of the activity was to encourage responses to bullying through discussions of how they think victims feel (perspective taking), how they felt if they were ever victims of bullying, and what they would do if they witness bullying

### 1.3.2. Contextualisation of the Intervention

In the guidelines for implementing PYD interventions, it is emphasised that researchers should acquire as much information as possible about programme participants and the contexts to which they belong before planning the programme [1]. Information was obtained by conducting focus groups which included students, teachers, and school leadership. Additionally, average values of the Five Cs within individual classes were reviewed. The results of both quantitative and qualitative contextualisation are presented in the Results section. Subsequently, the intervention was then modified based on the findings from the focus groups and the initial measurement of the Five Cs.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative components of the contextualisation were somewhat contradictory. Adhering predominantly to the findings of the qualitative component of contextualisation, the guidelines for designing positive youth development interventions were followed. This involved providing opportunities for youth by encouraging active participation and obtaining information about the different contexts of the participants, as reflected in the final intervention program.

Almost all the participants in the focus groups reported a lack of sports and social interaction, as the focus groups took place during a period of complete lockdown (December 2020, January 2021). In response, a range of sports activities and interactive content were incorporated into the intervention, with the aim of fostering connection between participants throughout the program. In addition, continuous adjustments were made based on participant feedback during individual sessions. This involved addressing their immediate needs by adapting activities according to their current mood and abilities. Further, more time was allocated to activities that specifically promoted the Cs, as identified through measurement results and participant input.

The final preparation of the intervention followed the guideline of creating a supportive environment. Each workshop had a similar sequence of activities to give the students a sense of security and structure, which was crucial for establishing contact with the intervention facilitators and ongoing collaboration. At the beginning of each session, the content of the workshop was introduced, together with explaining and defining its purpose and the purpose of each activity within the workshop. Each participant then shared what they were grateful for at that moment. This was followed by an ice-breaking activity to create a relaxed atmosphere. Afterward, an activity was conducted to promote the selected C. This was followed by a mid-session activity of a more sport nature (at the request of the focus group participants) or an activity that promoted the connection between breathing and movement, with the aim of providing a relaxation during the workshop. Later on, another activity related to the promotion of the selected C in that workshop was implemented. Most of the workshops also included homework to promote connection with others (i.e., parents or carers and teachers) or self-improvement. The end of each workshop involved a short mindfulness exercise. The various activities have been designed according to the guidelines of providing opportunities for youth and promoting activities that encourage their active participation. From the SAFE guidelines, the focus guideline was incorporated by including activities in the programme that clearly addressed the development of various personal skills, and clarity was achieved by pursuing specific competencies (i.e., the Five Cs) through activities in the program.

#### *1.4. The Current Study*

Numerous previous studies promoted youth development; however, only a few used measures that were related to the PYD framework in order to test the effectiveness of the intervention on the Five Cs (competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection). Consequently, a contextualised intervention was developed and implemented with the aim of promoting the Five Cs and reducing bullying involvement of participants. Intervention's effect was measured by one of the most used measures in the PYD framework [9]. In addition, PYD intervention guidelines and the importance of the interplay between the individual and his or her context and youth's active role in the PYD framework were taken into account. Thus, the aim of the present study was to evaluate the overall programme's effectiveness on the Five Cs in each of the four experimental groups that were included in the intervention and its indirect impact on bullying and victimisation. In addition, the research sought to explore how effective the programme was in promoting the Five Cs and whether it had an indirect effect on bullying and victimisation by comparing experimental and control groups in two schools. The study employed established the measurement of PYD and bullying, thereby addressing a research gap in the field of PYD. Based on the current research and the duration of a programme, it is assumed that the programme will have a greater impact on competence, confidence, and connection, while caring and character will remain stable over time. Furthermore, it is expected that experimental groups from general and vocational schools will have higher Five Cs after the intervention than control groups from the same schools. In addition, based on several findings, it is hypothesised that by addressing the various constructs that define positive youth development and establishing caring and empathetic relationships in supportive environments, the occurrence of bullying and victimisation can also be influenced. This study contributes to the literature in several ways: (1) the development and implementation of a contextualised intervention tailored to the actual state of the Five Cs in the classroom, while the students were actively involved in programme planning; (2) the evaluation of the intervention's impact on the Five Cs using established measures; (3) the examination of the intervention's indirect effect on bullying and victimisation; (4) the implementation of a contextualised intervention using online tools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Four first-year classes of upper-secondary school students were included in the intervention, each representing a different type of upper-secondary school: a general upper-secondary school (4 years), a technical upper-secondary school (4 years), a vocational upper-secondary school (3 years), and a short vocational upper-secondary school (2 years) [52]. A total of 66 students participated in the intervention, 33.3% of whom were female ( $M_{age} = 15.23$ ;  $SD = 0.98$ ). The general upper-secondary class was divided into two groups for easier implementation, with 31 students included in the intervention (35.7% female;  $M_{age} = 14.93$ ;  $SD = 0.38$ ), and each group consisted of 15 students. The upper-secondary technical class included 11 students (40% female;  $M_{age} = 15.00$ ;  $SD = 0.47$ ). The upper-secondary vocational class also included 11 students (100% male;  $M_{age} = 15.00$ ;  $SD = 0.00$ ), and the short vocational class included 14 students (50% female;  $M_{age} = 16.33$ ;  $SD = 1.72$ ). A total of 7 students (10.6%) who were born in another country were included in the intervention, as well as 51 students who were born in Slovenia (77.3%), while 8 students did not provide this information (12.1%).

The control group consisted of a total of 47 students (26.7% female;  $M_{age} = 15.07$ ;  $SD = 0.75$ ). Only a general upper-secondary school and vocational upper-secondary school had a control group. The control groups included students from the same school but from different classes that were involved in the intervention. The control group from the general upper-secondary school included 28 students (42.9% female;  $M_{age} = 14.93$ ;  $SD = 0.38$ ) and the control group of the vocational upper-secondary school consisted of 17 male students (100% male;  $M_{age} = 15.29$ ;  $SD = 1.11$ ). In total, 2 students (4.2%) who were born in another country were included in the control group, as well as 44 students who were born in Slovenia (93.6%), while 2 students did not provide this information (4.2%). Not enough consents were obtained from the technical upper-secondary school to participate, while only 1 student from the short vocational class participated in both measurements.

### 2.2. Measures

*The Five Cs of PYD.* The short version of the PYD questionnaire [9] consists of 34 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items measure the Five Cs: competence (e.g., “I do very well in my class work at school.”), confidence (e.g., “All in all, I am glad I am me.”), caring (e.g., “It makes me sad to see a person who doesn’t have friends.”), character (e.g., “I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn’t do.”), and connection (e.g., “My friends care about me.”). Reliability coefficients (ranging from 0.73 to 0.92) demonstrated the reliability of the questionnaire on the Slovenian data [53]. The present study also showed the satisfactory reliability of the questionnaire: competence (T1: 0.68, T2: 0.81), confidence (T1: 0.85, T2: 0.92), character (T1: 0.81, T2: 0.85), caring (T1: 0.92, T2: 0.89), connection (T1: 0.76, T2: 0.87).

*Bullying and victimisation.* The Adolescent Peer Relations Inventory: Bully/Victim (APRI-BT [54]) measures bullying and victimisation in verbal, physical, and social dimensions. The questionnaire consists of 36 items and is divided into two parts, bullying and victimisation, with 18 items in each part on a 6-point scale from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). Each part is further divided into three dimensions (verbal, physical, social) with six items each. The first part comprises items assessing the bullying perpetration, where individuals rate the frequency of their actions towards other students in the current school year (e.g., “I teased them by saying things to them.”). The second part comprises items assessing how often bullying behaviour happened to them (e.g., “A student wouldn’t be friends with me because other people didn’t like me.”). Both scales demonstrated high reliability in the Slovenian sample of adolescents (verbal bullying: 0.88, physical bullying: 0.81, social bullying: 0.81, verbal victimisation: 0.88, physical victimisation: 0.81, social victimisation: 0.84) [55]. In the present study, dimensions measuring verbal and social bullying and victimisation were utilised. The questionnaire exhibited excellent reliability in this sample:



verbal bullying (T1: 0.93, T2: 0.87), social bullying (T1: 0.98, T2: 0.88), verbal victimisation (T1: 0.93, T2: 0.87), social victimisation (T1: 0.92, T2: 0.88).

### 2.3. Procedure

Prior to intervention implementation, a multi-method contextualisation was carried out, both qualitatively (in the form of focus groups in all participating classes, involving students, teachers, and school leadership) and quantitatively (by examining the average scores of the Five Cs in each group in the first measurement of the entire research project), which significantly contributed to the development of the final intervention. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the workshops were conducted remotely using the Zoom online platform in February and March 2021. In this way, all workshops for students in upper-secondary, vocational, and technical education were conducted. For students in short vocational school, schools reopened on 15 February 2021 [56]; therefore, workshops were conducted in person and in school. Each workshop lasted two class periods (90 min) and was conducted jointly by two facilitators. A total of five workshops were conducted in each class, thematically aligned with each of the Five Cs (connection, competence, confidence, character, and caring). At the beginning of the school year, participants completed the first measurement, which was used for the quantitative contextualisation. Before the intervention, participants engaged in the second measurement, and subsequently, one to two months post-intervention, they responded to an additional questionnaire.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Initially, an examination for missing values was conducted, revealing variations in the number of participants across individual workshops. Additionally, disparities were identified in the number of participants who completed the questionnaire before and after the intervention. To assess programme effects, our analyses encompassed participants who completed the questionnaire in both measurements. Statistical data analysis employed the IBM SPSS software package, version 29.0. Short-term effects of the intervention and long-term effects for participants in the experimental groups were computed using repeated measures ANOVA. Comparison between experimental and control groups was conducted through a mixed ANOVA.

## 3. Results

The results are categorised into (a) quantitative and qualitative contextualisation of the intervention, (b) intervention effects, where the effectiveness of the overall intervention on the Five Cs (competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection) was assessed, first within each experimental group and then by comparing the experimental group with the control group in general and vocational schools, and (c) examination of the indirect effects of the intervention on bullying and victimisation, first within each experimental group, and then by comparing the experimental group with the control group in general and vocational schools. Due to the contextualisation of the intervention for each specific group and the incomparable contexts, the results are analysed separately for each group.

### 3.1. Quantitative and Qualitative Contextualisation of the Intervention

The following section first presents the quantitative results of the contextualisation of the intervention, namely, the results of the first measurement for each experimental group, and then the qualitative results, which include a summary of the focus groups with individual students.

A paired *t*-test was used to assess differences in the Five Cs within each group (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). Due to the ten paired comparisons, the Bonferroni correction was applied ( $p < 0.05/10 = 0.005$ ). In the group involved in general school, a statistically significant difference was found only in the means of competence and connection ( $t = -3.51, p = 0.002$ ). This indicates that they had a statistically significantly higher level of connection compared to competence. No differences were found for the

other Cs. Furthermore, no differences were found between the Five Cs for the groups involved in technical, vocational, and short vocational schools.

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations of the Five Cs for general school, technical school, vocational school, and short vocational school at the first measurement.

	GEN		TECH		VOC		SHORT VOC	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Competence	3.57	0.58	3.60	0.38	3.67	0.78	3.90	1.35
Confidence	3.64	0.84	3.67	0.76	3.98	0.54	4.13	1.40
Character	3.74	0.42	3.68	0.50	3.86	0.49	4.16	0.82
Caring	3.90	0.69	3.68	0.89	4.00	0.71	4.62	0.81
Connection	3.94	0.51	3.86	0.58	3.81	0.32	4.08	1.12

*Notes.* GEN—general upper-secondary school, TECH—technical upper-secondary school, VOC—vocational upper-secondary school, SHORT VOC—short vocational upper-secondary school.

After quantitative contextualisation, the Five Cs were only descriptively compared to see which C students rated as most and least present based on the measurement results. In all schools, competence was found to be the least present. Students in general school and students in vocational school identified connection as the most present indicator, while students in vocational school emphasised confidence and students in short vocational school emphasised caring.

In focus groups, students numerically rated individual Cs, which provided guidance for intervention preparation and highlighted specific Cs that need to be supported. Students in general school rated their competence lowest and their connection highest. Students in technical school rated caring the lowest and competence and character the highest. Students in vocational school gave the lowest rating to caring and the highest to character. Students in short vocational school gave the lowest rating to caring and the highest to competence.

When comparing the results of the qualitative and quantitative parts of contextualisation, there are discrepancies within the experimental groups, with the exception of the experimental group from general school. Students in technical school reported higher levels of competence and character and lower levels of caring in focus groups, while average scores on the Five Cs showed higher self-esteem and lower competence. Students in vocational school had higher levels of character and lower levels of caring in focus groups, while average levels of the Five Cs exhibited higher levels of connection and lower levels of competence. Students in short vocational school reported higher levels of competence and lower levels of caring, while the average values of the indicators from the questionnaire presented exactly the opposite.

### 3.2. Intervention Effects on the Five Cs for Each Upper-Secondary School

In the following section, firstly, the results of each experimental group from each upper-secondary school are presented, in terms of within-individual changes in the Five Cs. Further on, the experimental group from general school is compared to the control group from the same school and the experimental group from vocational school is compared to the control group from the same school.

In Table 3, the means and standard deviations of participants' responses to the Positive Youth Development questionnaire [9] both before and after the intervention within each experimental group of upper-secondary schools are presented. Additionally, the results of the repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) are presented. Regarding general school, ANOVAs for repeated measures for the Five Cs indicated no within-subjects changes over time in competence, confidence, character, and caring. However, participants reported higher levels of connection after the intervention compared to before the intervention. For technical school, repeated measures ANOVA indicated a change over time only for confidence. More specifically, in the experimental group of technical school, after the intervention, confidence decreased compared to pre-intervention levels. In the experimental

group from the vocational school, ANOVA for repeated measures showed that there were marginal statistical differences on the variable confidence, which declined in this group after the intervention. For short vocational school, there were no changes after the intervention.

**Table 3.** Changes over time in the Five Cs within individuals in the experimental group from each school.

	Before		After		SS	F
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>General school</i>						
Competence	3.60	0.51	3.55	0.53	0.04	0.37
Confidence	3.58	0.62	3.68	0.66	0.16	1.34
Character	3.67	0.46	3.76	0.45	0.10	1.06
Caring	3.57	0.79	3.58	0.58	0.00	0.01
Connection	3.76	0.40	3.94	0.46	0.42	5.30 **
<i>Technical school</i>						
Competence	3.20	0.60	3.17	0.53	0.01	0.23
Confidence	3.96	0.53	3.37	0.56	1.58	5.61 **
Character	4.10	0.35	3.93	0.37	0.13	2.37
Caring	4.20	0.59	3.91	0.55	0.40	2.86
Connection	3.81	0.31	3.53	0.47	0.35	2.59
<i>Vocational school</i>						
Competence	3.63	0.53	3.54	0.85	0.03	0.06
Confidence	4.35	0.37	3.58	1.08	2.38	4.47 *
Character	3.64	0.89	3.31	1.06	0.43	0.65
Caring	3.15	1.12	3.33	1.00	0.14	0.33
Connection	3.72	0.53	3.81	0.79	0.04	0.50
<i>Short vocational school</i>						
Competence	3.67	0.78	3.00	1.07	2.00	2.01
Confidence	4.06	0.72	3.67	1.34	0.68	0.46
Character	3.99	0.91	3.60	1.16	0.68	0.80
Caring	3.57	1.43	3.67	1.14	0.04	0.03
Connection	4.33	0.45	3.71	1.16	1.76	2.49

Notes. Before—before the intervention, After—after the intervention.  $p^* < 0.10$ ;  $p^{**} < 0.05$ .

#### Comparisons between Experimental and Control Groups in the Five Cs before and after the Intervention

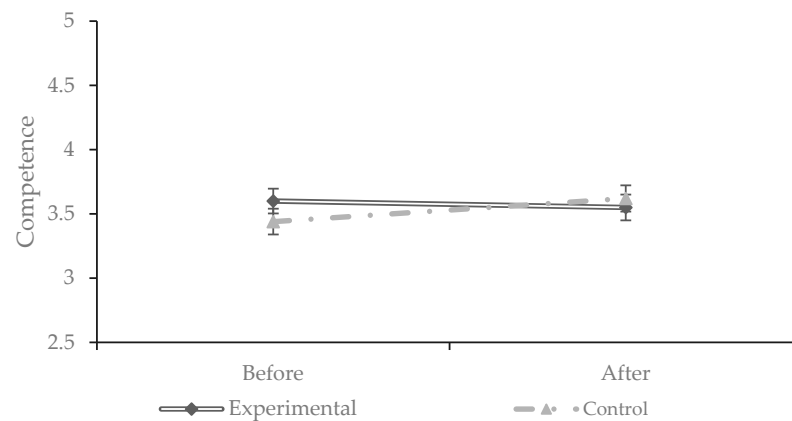
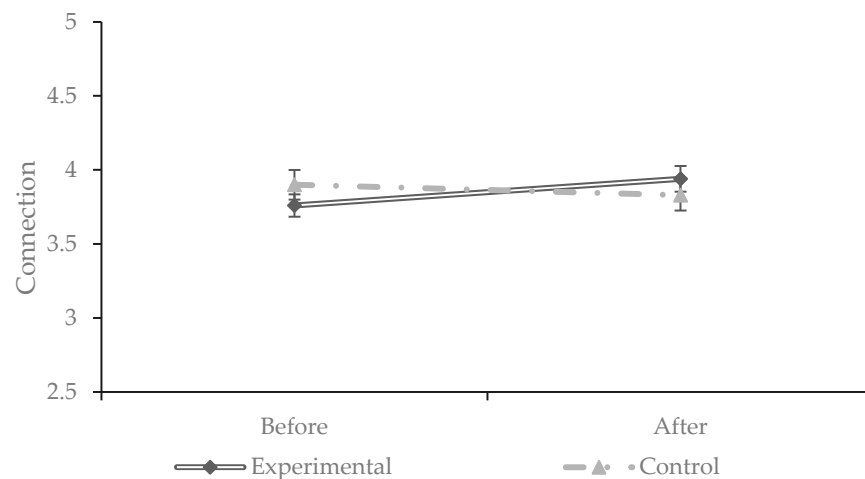
The subsequent analysis provides a comparison of the Five Cs between the experimental and control groups within general school and vocational school. No such comparisons are available for the remaining two schools. This is due to insufficient informal parent consents in the control group for secondary vocational education (both classes were merged and participated in the intervention), and for short vocational school, since only one student from the control group participated in both measurements.

Differences in the Five Cs between the experimental and control groups from general school and technical school were examined (see Table 4). For general school, marginally significant differences between the groups were observed only in the domain of caring, with the control group reporting a greater change in caring than the experimental group. More specifically, the experimental group remained stable in caring, while caring in the control group slightly decreased. However, caring in the control group was initially higher than caring in the experimental group. An interaction between time and intervention involvement was also assessed. A mixed ANOVA revealed that, in the post-intervention measurement, the level of competence increased among students in the control group compared to those in the experimental group, where it remained stable (see Figure 1). Conversely, the mixed ANOVA demonstrated that, after the intervention, the experimental group reported a higher level of connection compared to the control group (see Figure 2).

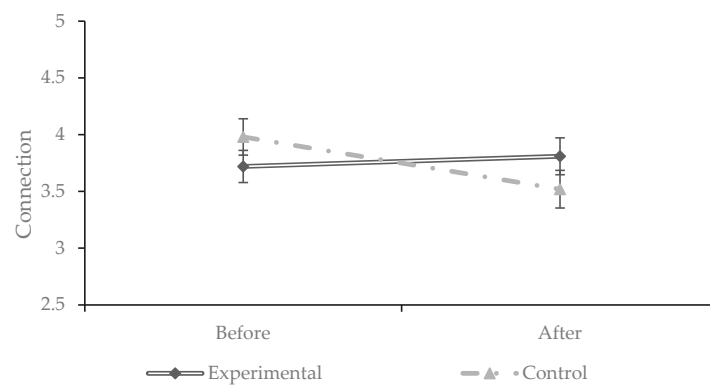
**Table 4.** Comparison of the Five Cs between experimental and control groups before and after the intervention for general and vocational schools.

	Experimental		Control		Group	Time × Group
	Before M (SD)	After M (SD)	Before M (SD)	After M (SD)	F	F
<i>General school</i>						
Competence	3.60 (0.51)	3.55 (0.53)	3.44 (0.53)	3.62 (0.54)	0.10	4.50 **
Confidence	3.58 (0.62)	3.68 (0.66)	3.78 (0.66)	3.76 (0.73)	0.65	1.06
Character	3.67 (0.46)	3.76 (0.45)	3.88 (0.64)	3.86 (0.53)	1.30	0.91
Caring	3.57 (0.79)	3.58 (0.58)	3.95 (0.75)	3.90 (0.62)	3.66 *	0.21
Connection	3.76 (0.40)	3.94 (0.46)	3.90 (0.53)	3.83 (0.55)	0.01	4.88 **
<i>Vocational school</i>						
Competence	3.63 (0.53)	3.54 (0.85)	3.62 (0.56)	3.62 (0.73)	0.02	0.05
Confidence	4.35 (0.37)	3.58 (1.08)	3.76 (0.63)	3.67 (0.93)	0.76	2.28
Character	3.64 (0.89)	3.31 (1.06)	3.84 (0.62)	3.44 (0.78)	0.29	0.02
Caring	3.15 (1.12)	3.33 (1.00)	3.40 (0.88)	3.31 (0.91)	0.09	0.31
Connection	3.72 (0.53)	3.81 (0.79)	3.98 (0.56)	3.52 (0.75)	0.00	3.68 *

Notes. Before—before the intervention, After—after the intervention.  $p^* < 0.10$ ;  $p^{**} < 0.05$ .

**Figure 1.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding competence in general school.**Figure 2.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding connection in general school.

As for technical school, a mixed ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the groups; however, an interaction effect between group and time emerged. Specifically, there was a marginal change in connection, wherein the experimental group maintained stability, while the control group experienced a decrease (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding connection in vocational school.

### 3.3. Indirect Effect of Intervention on Bullying and Victimization

This section initially presents the results of each experimental group concerning changes within individuals in various forms of bullying and victimisation. Subsequently, the experimental groups of general school and vocational school are compared with their respective control groups.

Table 5 shows the within-individual changes over time with respect to the different forms of bullying and victimisation for each experimental group. For general school, the results show that there was a within-subject change in time for this experimental group for verbal bullying ( $p = 0.022$ ), verbal victimisation ( $p = 0.038$ ), and social victimisation ( $p = 0.077$ ). This indicates that there was a decrease in verbal bullying, verbal victimisation, and social victimisation after the intervention. There were no significant differences within-individuals before and after the intervention in technical and vocational schools. For short vocational school, analyses showed that there was a marginal change in cyberbullying after the intervention ( $p = 0.064$ ), which increased post-intervention.

**Table 5.** Changes over time in violence and victimisation within individuals in the experimental group of general school.

	Before		After		SS	F
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>General school</i>						
Verbal bullying	1.67	0.77	1.43	0.49	0.79	5.87 **
Social bullying	1.21	0.36	1.11	0.21	0.16	1.99
Verbal victimisation	1.41	0.55	1.19	0.37	0.66	4.77 **
Social victimisation	1.27	0.49	1.07	0.49	0.54	3.39 *
Cyberbullying	1.23	0.38	1.23	0.38	0.00	0.00
Cybervictimisation	1.12	0.27	1.07	0.17	0.03	0.94
<i>Technical school</i>						
Verbal bullying	1.11	0.19	1.13	0.33	0.00	0.07
Social bullying	1.02	0.56	1.02	0.56	0.00	0.00
Verbal victimisation	1.46	0.93	1.17	0.30	0.40	1.90
Social victimisation	1.09	0.15	1.22	0.49	0.08	3.21
Cyberbullying	1.00	0.00	1.02	0.06	0.00	1.00
Cybervictimisation	1.02	0.06	1.04	0.11	0.00	0.18
<i>Vocational school</i>						
Verbal bullying	1.25	0.33	1.58	0.89	0.44	1.00
Social bullying	1.13	0.35	1.27	0.50	0.09	1.00
Verbal victimisation	1.02	0.06	1.27	0.45	0.25	2.25
Social victimisation	1.00	0.00	1.27	0.45	0.29	2.85
Cyberbullying	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Cybervictimisation	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Short vocational school</i>						
Verbal bullying	2.11	1.91	1.89	1.42	0.22	0.10
Social bullying	1.98	1.80	1.76	1.10	0.22	0.09
Verbal victimisation	1.70	1.47	2.09	1.34	0.68	0.30
Social victimisation	1.78	1.63	1.96	1.35	0.07	0.81
Cyberbullying	1.13	0.39	1.65	0.88	1.21	4.62 *
Cybervictimisation	1.06	0.17	1.78	1.18	2.35	3.10

Notes. Before—before the intervention, After—after the intervention.  $p^* < 0.10$ ;  $p^{**} < 0.05$ .



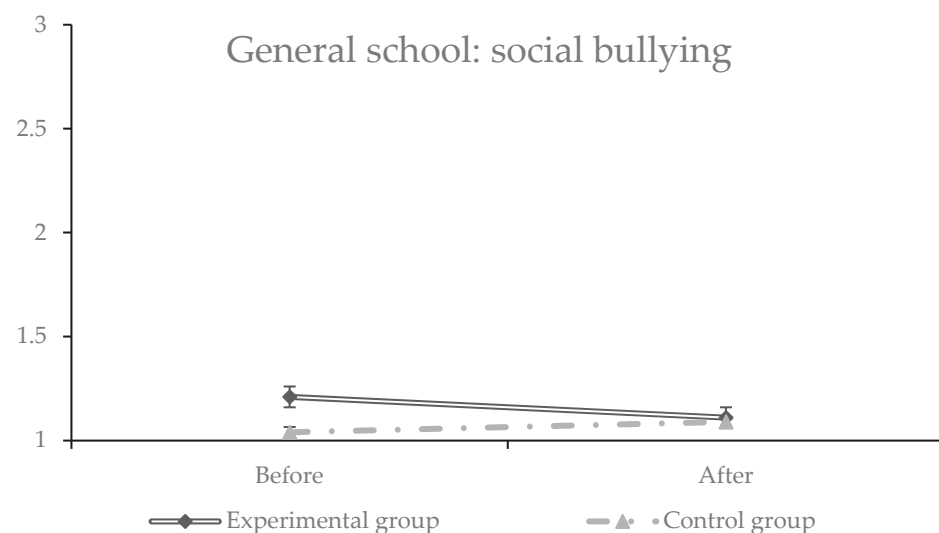
### Comparisons between Experimental and Control Groups in Bullying and Victimisation before and after the Intervention

In Table 6, the differences between the experimental and control groups in bullying and victimisation are presented. For general school, the mixed ANOVA showed that there were marginal significant differences between the two groups in social bullying at the first measurement. More specifically, the control group reported lower levels of social bullying ( $p = 0.075$ ). There was also a marginally significant interaction between group and time in social bullying, with an increase in the control group and a decrease in social bullying in the experimental group after the intervention (see Figure 4).

**Table 6.** Comparison in bullying and victimisation between experimental and control groups before and after the intervention for general and vocational schools.

	Experimental		Control		Group	Time $\times$ Group
	Before <i>M (SD)</i>	After <i>M (SD)</i>	Before <i>M (SD)</i>	After <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
<i>General school</i>						
Verbal bullying	1.67 (0.77)	1.43 (0.49)	1.48 (0.49)	1.25 (0.26)	1.89	0.00
Social bullying	1.21 (0.36)	1.11 (0.21)	1.04 (0.10)	1.09 (0.25)	3.31 *	3.02 *
Verbal victimisation	1.41 (0.55)	1.19 (0.37)	1.25 (0.32)	1.14 (0.19)	1.34	0.71
Social victimisation	1.27 (0.49)	1.08 (0.22)	1.13 (0.27)	1.07 (0.14)	1.49	1.08
Cyberbullying	1.23 (0.38)	1.23 (0.38)	1.12 (0.19)	1.15 (0.33)	1.35	0.20
Cybervictimisation	1.12 (0.27)	1.07 (0.17)	1.06 (0.11)	1.07 (0.24)	0.49	0.62
<i>Vocational school</i>						
Verbal bullying	1.25 (0.33)	1.58 (0.89)	1.97 (1.27)	1.73 (0.87)	1.61	1.10
Social bullying	1.13 (0.36)	1.27 (0.50)	1.76 (1.21)	1.24 (0.32)	1.07	3.42 *
Verbal victimisation	1.02 (0.06)	1.27 (0.45)	1.61 (0.69)	1.51 (0.58)	3.45 *	2.41
Social victimisation	1.00 (0.00)	1.27 (0.45)	1.59 (0.70)	1.32 (0.38)	2.68	6.52 **
Cyberbullying	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.38 (0.45)	1.18 (0.23)	6.34 **	2.41
Cybervictimisation	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.36 (0.57)	1.12 (0.26)	4.36 **	1.17

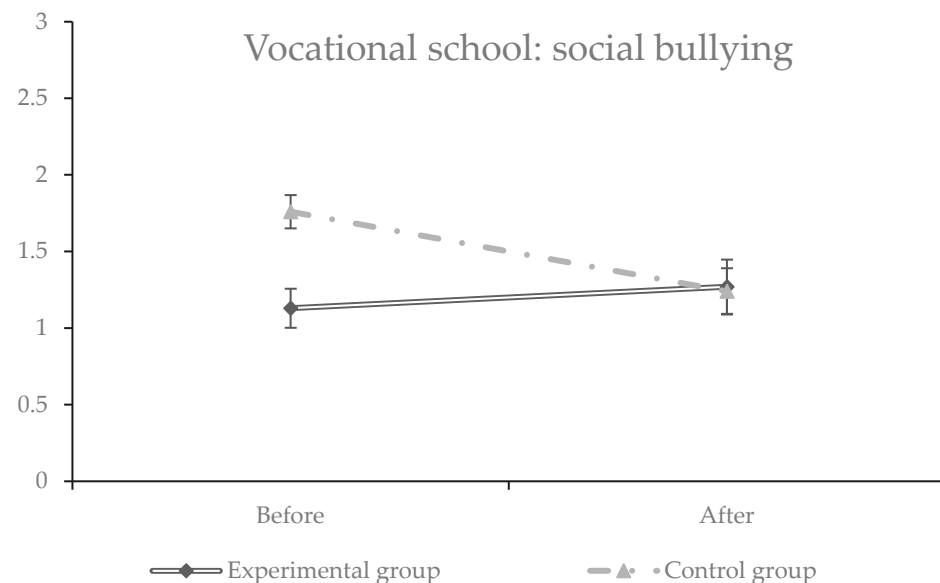
Notes. Before—before the intervention, After—after the intervention.  $p^* < 0.10$ ;  $p^{**} < 0.05$ .



**Figure 4.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding social bullying in general school.

For vocational school, a mixed ANOVA showed that initial differences between the experimental and control groups were found in verbal victimisation, cyberbullying, and cybervictimisation. In particular, the control group reported higher levels of bullying involvement than the experimental group at the first measurement. There was also an interaction between group and time in social bullying and social victimisation, with an increase in social victimisation in the experimental group and a decrease in the control

group (Figure 5). The same occurred for relational victimisation, which also decreased in the control group and increased in the experimental group (Figure 6).



**Figure 5.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding social bullying in vocational school.



**Figure 6.** Interaction between time and intervention involvement regarding social victimisation in vocational school.

#### 4. Discussion

Numerous studies found that providing support to youth's potentials while enhancing their strengths in a supportive environment can enhance their optimal development and improve their interaction with contexts they belong to. However, only few assessed the effect of the intervention by employing measures that are directly linked to PYD indicators, such as the Five Cs. Thus, the purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of tailored interventions in individual experimental groups through evaluating the effects of the entire intervention on the Five Cs and assessing the indirect effects of the intervention on bullying and victimisation. Due to the contextualisation of the programme for each group separately and the incomparable contexts of the groups, the experimental groups were treated individually. Two experimental groups (i.e., from general upper-secondary

school and vocational upper-secondary school) were also compared with control groups, consisting of students from another class of the same generation within the same upper-secondary school.

Firstly, the effects of the entire intervention on the Five Cs in individual experimental groups were examined. In general school, there was an increase in connection after the intervention, with no other significant changes over time. In technical and vocational schools, there was a statistically significant decrease in confidence after the intervention, with no other changes over time. There were no differences over time in short vocational school. It was expected that after the intervention competence, confidence, and connection will increase, while character and caring will remain stable over time. This was only partially confirmed, as character and caring remained stable over time in all experimental groups, indicating no changes in these two indicators. Besides within-individual changes after the intervention, differences between experimental group and control group in general and vocational schools were examined. It was expected that participation in the intervention would contribute to the Five Cs in such a way that all the Cs would improve in the experimental groups compared to the control groups. The results show that in general school, competence in experimental group remained stable while it decreased in control group. However, connection increased in both experimental groups while it decreased in the control groups.

As no changes were found in character and caring, it is important to note that character and caring are closely intertwined, since emotions related to others, such as compassion and moral guilt, are strongly linked to moral behaviour [31]. Character also remained stable in other interventions [5]. Regarding caring, findings suggest that although intervention can increase empathy levels [5,34], the change is small and likely more dependent on cognitive development than contextual changes [33]. Considering the time period during which the intervention was implemented, the stability of character and caring is noteworthy. This finding gains significance in light of the challenging circumstances adolescents confronted during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by various measures such as curfews and gathering restrictions. Given the developmental characteristics of adolescence (increased need for peer affiliation), adolescents were likely to want social interaction with peers, but they were also afraid of breaking rules and potentially harming their families by contracting the virus.

Furthermore, increases in competence, confidence, and connection were anticipated after the intervention, which only occurred in the experimental group from general school, particularly in connection. Contrarily, both the technical and vocational school experimental groups experienced a decrease in confidence. Previous research employing positive youth development questionnaires as intervention outcome measures found no significant effects on most Cs [5–7]. Kajokiene et al. [6] even reported a decrease in connection in the experimental group. The increase in connection in the experimental group from general school can be attributed to both programme effects and individual or contextual factors. At an individual level, normative youth is motivated to develop appropriate and supportive relationships within their peer group, despite significant differences between them (i.e., differences in temperament), personal circumstances (i.e., socioeconomic status), and migrant background [57]. This contributes significantly to how and to what extent they engage in relationships with their peers. Despite these differences, general school students sought common interests and perspectives through their participation in the intervention. This process aimed at harmonising behaviour across the class and potentially fostering a sense of connection with the peer group [58]. Within the intervention, the emphasis on connection primarily focused on classmates, with whom students spent more time and, according to self-reports, became better acquainted. While certain activities (particularly homework) were aimed at enhancing connection with significant others, such as parents or carers and teachers, this alone is likely to be insufficient if it involves only unidirectional interaction without incorporating multiple contexts. Similar to many previous interventions, the current intervention was primarily designed to promote individual competencies

rather than to induce change across multiple contexts [24]. On the other hand, previous evidence suggests that mere participation in interventions can significantly contribute to more positive relationships with parents and teachers [16]. Notwithstanding the lack of different contexts within the intervention, it is crucial to consider known changes in the context to better understand potential intervention effects. Following the intervention, students returned to school after a prolonged period of distance learning, which contributed to the strengthening of relationships with peers and teachers. In addition, the relaxation of various COVID-19 related measures (e.g., no police curfews, reopening of restaurants, and the permission to attend sports and cultural events), provided additional opportunities for socialisation beyond the family and school contexts.

Besides within-individual changes after the intervention, both experimental groups that were compared with control groups exhibited higher connection (while it should be emphasised that the statistical difference in the vocational school was marginal). This increase can be explained by the fact that students in the experimental groups spent more time together even during school closures than students in the control groups. Previous findings from a longitudinal study examining changes in psychosocial functioning before and during the COVID-19 pandemic [59] showed that the majority of adolescents experienced an increase in psychosocial problems and another fifth of the sample struggled with peer problems. It is safe to say that even short interventions can contribute to their sense of belonging and connection, which can further improve their psychosocial functioning. Furthermore, as the quality of friendships remains the same online [60], future emphasis in the school context during similar crises should be placed on providing a safe online environment for students to maintain their existing friendships and explore possible new ones. After the intervention, all participating students highlighted the contribution it had on their connection with their classmates, whom they did not even know by name before the intervention due to the prolonged school closure.

The decline in confidence in the technical and vocational school (marginal statistical difference) experimental groups can be explained by the interaction of individual and contextual factors. Some students returned to school after the intervention and before completing the final questionnaire, which may have contributed to the post-intervention decline in confidence. This transition back to school may have particularly affected first-year students who were involved in the intervention since they experienced face-to-face school only for a month and a half, in September and early October. This change may have increased stress levels and anxiety as they faced assessments and a different approach to learning than they were used to, as evidenced by the findings of other studies following the return to school [61]. The experience of stress may have further increased the likelihood of lower academic performance by influencing the emergence of negative self-perceptions [62] which may have led to lower confidence. In a study investigating the role of school and peer connection in adolescents' mental health after returning to school [61], it was found that returning to school was challenging for all, regardless of their level of connection. However, greater increases in anxiety were observed among those reporting lower levels of connection. Even though no differences in levels of connection were found between the two groups before and after the intervention, it is possible that a distinction based on levels of connection within the group could further explain the decline in confidence. This is supported by the social information processing theory [63], which proposes that experiences with others significantly influence perceptions of self-efficacy.

Furthermore, in the experimental group from general school, competence remained approximately the same, while it increased in the control group. Due to the lack of information about the contexts of the control group, it is difficult to explain the reason for this increase. It is possible that the return to school was more successful for this group, i.e., that their academic, social, emotional, and sport-related competences increased after returning to school for a variety of possible reasons, as their competence was lower during the school closure than in the experimental group.

The second aim of the study was to examine whether participation in a positive youth development intervention could reduce the incidence of bullying and victimisation. In the experimental group of general school, students reported a lower level of verbal bullying and victimisation, as well as a lower level of social victimisation after participating in the program. Conversely, in the experimental group of short vocational school, there was an increase in cyberbullying following the program. No changes over time were observed in the remaining experimental groups. Regarding comparisons between experimental and control groups, there was a marginal statistical decline in social bullying in experimental group from general school, while in the control group social bullying slightly increased. In the experimental group from vocational school, there was an increase in social bullying and victimisation after the intervention, whereas in the control group there was a decrease.

These results mostly align with the findings of a meta-analysis of programmes aimed at promoting positive youth development, which examined the effects of such programmes on risky behaviours [39]. The meta-analysis concluded that programmes promoting positive youth development did not contribute to a reduction in risky behaviours. However, individual programmes promoting positive youth development have been successful in reducing peer violence and victimisation [44]. The possible reason for the reduction in verbal bullying and verbal and social victimisation specifically in the experimental group from general school lies in higher connection in this group following the program. In particular, connection with peers, teachers, and family plays a significant role in victimisation [64,65]. Higher levels of connection with significant others may protect adolescents from experiencing victimisation or this social network may support them if they become victims of bullying. This can also be linked to the assumption that positive assets within individuals or their context can provide protection against certain risky behaviours, either directly or through cumulative effects [3]. In this case, connection protects adolescents from experiencing or engaging in bullying behaviour directly, since increased connection leads to less bullying and victimisation. As there was also a marginal statistical difference in social bullying between experimental and control groups from general school, it can be once again concluded that higher connection in the experimental group significantly contributed to the reduction in social bullying. This is consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis [66] which found that perpetrators of social bullying are disliked by their peers. In addition, it is important to note that popularity plays a significant role in social bullying, with bullies having high popularity, although this is not included in connection, as the latter involves reciprocal positive relationships and not only having high social status.

The marginal statistical increase in cyberbullying in the experimental group of short vocational school may be attributed to discussions with students about bullying and cyberbullying, during which we collectively defined the bullying behaviour. This may have led to heightened awareness among participants. As a result, students in this group may have more precisely identified their online actions, leading to a higher reported incidence of cyberbullying as was suggested in previous studies [67]. The increase in social bullying (marginal difference) and victimisation in the experimental group of vocational school can be explained by a decrease in confidence after the intervention in this group, especially since victimisation is negatively associated with self-efficacy [68], which is a key aspect of confidence. Being a victim of bullying may have a negative impact on one's self-perception, as it is inconsistent with one's goals in terms of peer acceptance. Furthermore, being a bully is not related to lower self-efficacy [68], although engaging in social bullying is associated with being disliked by peers [66], which can later on contribute to lower social self-efficacy. Nevertheless, contextual influences should be considered when examining changes in bullying and victimisation since higher pro-bullying classroom norms represent a risk factor for bullying and victimisation [Author].

#### *Limitations, Implications for Practice, and Future Studies*

The strengths of the present study are mostly in efforts to contextualise and tailor the intervention to individual experimental groups while taking into account both measure-



ments and focus groups. Furthermore, it was shown that such interventions can be adapted to an online format, as indicated by the observed effects. Particularly in times of extreme crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these programmes can help youth to maintain established relationships not only with peers but also with teachers and other significant adults. Moreover, participants expressed satisfaction with the workshops, highlighting improved mutual understanding, enhanced connection, increased communication, and the exploration of significant topics that otherwise might be unaddressed in school. However, this study also has several limitations. Initially, a significant deficit in obtained informed consents was noted, resulting in the absence of control groups in some schools (i.e., technical and short vocational schools). Furthermore, the whole sample size was small, which does not allow us to make any conclusions about the usefulness of such interventions. The contextualisation of the programme itself posed challenges, since the outcomes of focus groups and questionnaire results were inconsistent. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the intervention was delivered online for experimental groups from general, technical, and vocational schools. Consequently, the implementation was more structured than intended and recommended for such programmes [3,69]. All online workshops impeded student participation, limited interactions among participants and facilitators, and reduced the level of supportive relationships that would be more easily established in person. Due to changing regulations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, students were physically present in the school while the facilitators conducted the workshops remotely. Additionally, the motivation of general upper-secondary school students to participate may have been influenced by the intervention being implemented outside their regular school schedule. For the students from short vocational upper-secondary school, poorer language comprehension due to a significant number of migrant students may have affected their participation. The programme was relatively short, consisting of only five 90 min sessions covering a wide range of topics. The post-intervention measurements were taken about a month or two after the programme ended. The results could have been influenced by many other factors, including changes at the individual, classroom, school, and community levels, which were not taken into account. Furthermore, marginally statistical intervention results must be examined with caution.

The study has demonstrated that PYD can be fostered through online tools. However, it is crucial for such programmes to build them based on the expressed needs of the participants. Therefore, in practice, it is essential to follow the youth in the development and implementation of programmes. Through the workshop evaluation, it became evident that students desire such programmes, as they feel there are limited opportunities to discuss topics covered in the programme (emotional and social competences, moral behaviour, empathy, acceptance of diversity) within the school and are eager to engage in such conversations. Therefore, introducing such workshops into the school curriculum, particularly during the transition to upper-secondary school, when adolescents undergo significant changes (e.g., change in school, classmates, routines), could facilitate their connection with peers and promote supportive relationships. The responses of the students partially confirm the results, as the sense of connection with various contexts (peers, school, parents, community) increased in two groups, while other Cs mostly showed no changes over time or in comparison to the control group. Additionally, the significance of the relationship between participants and programme facilitators should not be overlooked, as facilitators can serve as role models for the youth. It is also advisable to consider the context of the transition from primary to upper-secondary school and offer a programme tailored to the expressed needs of these students.

Future research should include an evaluation of programme effects on various outcomes such as academic performance, prosocial behaviour, internalised problems. Further research is needed to explore whether online programmes can address the Five Cs of PYD, and these activities should integrate the importance of the online community. In addition, interventions should be longer and pay more attention to the diversity of participants, including special needs, language, and cultural backgrounds. Most importantly, as PYD is

based on the positive interaction between individuals and their contexts, peers, teachers, parents, and the wider community should be involved in the intervention.

## 5. Conclusions

Supporting optimal youth development with a focus on youth's potential and existing strengths through interventions is crucial. Despite the large number of interventions, the effects of the intervention are not commonly tested using existing measures of the Five Cs of PYD. Furthermore, it is not clear whether promoting the Five Cs of PYD can have an indirect effect on the occurrence of bullying and victimisation. To address these gaps, the present study examined the effect of a tailored intervention in different first-year classes from upper-secondary school programmes on changes in the Five Cs and bullying behaviour. One of the key findings is that the intervention was most successful in promoting connection within some experimental groups, particularly when compared to the control groups. The observed differences between the experimental and control groups may indicate a systemic lack of support for the development of peer relationships, particularly during the transition from lower- to upper-secondary school. On the other hand, it is crucial not to overlook the extremely important contextual factors that may have contributed to initial lower levels of connection (especially peer connection) during the pandemic. In some experimental groups, confidence decreased after the intervention. However, the potential negative effects of the programme on the Five Cs may be due to the fact that each of these indicators covers a very broad area, making it difficult to address them comprehensively. In the experimental group from general school, social bullying decreased compared to the control group, which can be linked to higher connection after the intervention in the experimental group. On the other hand, in the experimental group from vocational school, social bullying and victimisation increased compared to the control group. It is noteworthy that confidence decreased in the same group, which may contribute to higher bullying and victimisation. Despite this, some positive results indicate that even in times of difficult situations, brief interventions can improve the psychosocial functioning of youth to some extent. This implies that fostering mutually supportive relationships between youth and their contexts is crucial for facilitating their development.

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