

Potential of schools to promote spatial solidarity by recognising intergenerational power relations: Staff perspective

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Abstract

The paper is based on a study where 24 staff members of a school in Finland were asked to complete fictional post-apocalypse stories in an investigation interested in the rationales underlying sources of solidarity in school. The research was motivated by the idea that intergenerational solidarity is vital to young people's wellbeing because it can promote young people's participation in schools. Drawing on the concept of spatial solidarity, the analysis reveals three sources of solidarity: interdependency, norms and values, and intergenerational conflict. The findings highlight that solidarities in school derive from place-based power dynamics that can sustain adult centric hierarchies but also have the potential to lead to genuine intergenerational collaboration. Understanding these sources of solidarity can help adults working with young people to critically reflect on how they contribute to the world beyond the individual and how a democratic outlook on power relations can be realized in intergenerational communities.

Keywords

power relations, solidarity, story completion, community, school

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Introduction

Roundfield et al. (2018) consider pupil-staff relations critical to school engagement. The purpose of this paper is to present much needed knowledge about power relations between young people and adults by focusing on the under-researched school staff perspective. The paper goes from the premise that young people and school staff are co-learners in developing communal practices. By fully acknowledging the role of the staff, school bonding in this paper is not seen as a skill or an asset of an individual pupil or staff member (see Keppens and Spruyt, 2019). Instead, bonding is taken to be based on mutual trust. Hence, the emphasis is on a shared sense of belonging, built between pupils and school staff. This way bonding and solidarity become a communal effort, where the staff have a crucial part to play.

This paper explores intergenerational power relations between staff and pupils to contribute to research aiming to promote wellbeing in schools through the understanding of power dynamics shaping solidarity. The focus is on staff members and how they describe these relations. By considering what the sources of school staff's contemporary solidarities are and how the staff reason the choices that guide these solidarities, the paper acknowledges educators as vital to young people's wellbeing (see also Matthews et al., 2015). In aiming to support democracy and democratic interaction, Suppers and Vajen (2025) highlight the significance of intergenerational communities, since they harbour underacknowledged visions about what democratic societies should look like.

Morinaj et al. (2023) highlight that schools and teachers are indispensable to building an environment in which young people can develop meaningful and healthy social relationships, not only with peers but also with staff. Similarly, Hurd et al. (2018) call for research that sheds light on the formation of such supportive bonds in school. Young people benefit from a positive school environment that sets goals other than academic factors (Berkowitz, 2022) and hence, it is important to consider how relations between staff and pupils can be improved (Kanchewa et al., 2018). Improving connections within school space requires specific knowledge (Mack et al., 2025; Sanders, 2024) and producing such knowledge is the purpose of this paper.

A sense of solidarity can provide an important communal goal for schools as youth wellbeing is linked to socio-emotional competencies developed within intergenerational and intra-generational contexts (Ramos Carranza et al., 2024). According to a Swedish study (Torbjörnsson and Molin, 2015), the concept of solidarity is rarely raised in school classes, and when it is, the historical context is emphasised i.e. the implications of solidarity in contemporary schools are insufficiently addressed. Even though researchers from different fields have been interested in solidarity inducing encounters of children in schools (Bath and Karlsson, 2016; McGovern and Devine, 2016; Scholtz and Gilligan, 2017; Sime et al., 2021), surprisingly little attention has been paid to trying to understand solidarity from the point of view of school professionals who, after all, are essential shapers of school interactions that can potentially produce solidarities (Schuermans and Debruyne, 2017).

The focus on school communities from the staff perspective has been primarily on solidarity from a multicultural perspective (Schuermans and Debruyne, 2017) or from the standpoint of social justice (Oto and Smaller, 2024; Woodrow, 2018). These studies pinpoint the need to look more closely at solidarity, as they highlight the power relations at the core of many challenges faced by school communities. Hence, it is important to examine what constitutes solidarity from the standpoint of school staff and how the staff reason their choices of alliances and detachments in school. This article focuses on negotiations and reasonings in the context of spatial solidarity that acknowledges complex place-based power negotiations (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016; see; Oosterlynck et al., 2017).

Warming (2019), when exploring trust and power relations in the context of public schools, found that pupils experience distrust and misrecognition due to increasing governmentalization that undermine the opportunities for genuine inclusion and recognition. Hence, it is important to study how staff understand solidarity and the space they are willing to give to young people in regard to negotiations about everyday solidarities. This willingness shapes the cultural conditions where solidarities and wellbeing are either impaired or enhanced. Moberg and Kuusisto (2024), in their study on student teachers, found that offering opportunities to explore values and engage with community afford an important opportunity to critically contemplate the existing social, cultural and value-based structures. Only then can teachers promote active citizenship.

As outlined above, focus of this paper is on how school staff construct solidarity in the sphere of the school within the complex setting of intra- and intergenerational negotiations. The paper consists of four parts following the Introduction. The first part discusses the concept of spatial solidarity. The second outlines methodology where the participants were asked to create an imaginary post-zombie apocalypse school environment where fictional characters (youth, adult) were responsible for creating alliances. The third discusses the sources of solidarity identified in these stories. The paper ends with discussion and conclusions, outlining its theoretical and practical implications for contemporary solidarity in schools.

Solidarity in schools under daily negotiation

The premise of the study is that contemporary social life is complex with overlapping social categories, which makes solidarity an important overarching theme in social dynamics (see Oosterlynck et al., 2017). In this paper, the concept of *spatial solidarity* is applied to comprehend such complexities through negotiations and conflicts that manifest in place-based communities such as schools. The concept has developed from understanding that the traditional perception of solidarity built upon claims of shared disadvantages is difficult to achieve in today's diverse societies and communities (Oosterlynck et al., 2016) since it is often impossible to identify shared values and a 'shared opponent'. Spatial solidarity, therefore, focuses on practices of solidarity between diverse individuals. These practices are dependent on localized agonistic here and now negotiations between individuals. This spatio-temporal dynamic underpins spatial solidarity.

Oosterlynck et al. (2016) claim that place-based encounters produce solidarities that are under daily construction. Hence the solidarities produced by such micro-level encounters offer limitless opportunities for further solidarities to develop, simultaneously revealing a spatio-temporal power dynamic within increasingly diverse communities (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016; see; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). Hence, the concept of spatial solidarity used in this study allows the researcher to step outside the idea of shared values at the core of solidarity and understand solidarity as being perpetually in the making. The concept of spatial solidarity affords the understanding of schools as spaces where individuals are 'thrown together' (see Massey, 2008) without a shared value set or choice to opt out. These very specific conditions have an impact on solidarity formations. When solidarity is understood in this way, the power struggles and negotiations connected to the school become indispensable to solidarity producing processes.

The concept of spatial solidarity is particularly interesting from the staff point of view, because top-down adult-based decisions bring tensions to school communities, but at the same time schools have an enormous potential for building solidarities in intergenerational space. Importantly, school spaces provide learning experiences for young people and adults on how such spaces can be shared in a way that allows participation for all (Crook, 2021). To create such places critical reflexivity is needed to step back from adult-centric decision making in schools (Bertrand et al., 2023). The paper

concur with [Lombardo and Polonko \(2010\)](#), who argue that adultism, also in schools, is a system of structured inequality or oppression. Hence adultism goes beyond individual instances or role adaptations. This perspective on power is important because solidarity struggles between staff and pupils are essentially governed by adults.

As outlined above, by using the concept of spatial solidarity, power negotiations at the intersection of individual, communal and structural positions can be accessed. As [Figuera-Maz et al. \(2013\)](#) state, young people's actions are often filtered by adults, which can lead to an adult-centric vision of how everyday power relations operate. Hence, it is crucial to delve deeper into these relations to comprehend how adults reason their perspectives on young people and the possibilities for intergenerational solidarity. [Crook \(2021\)](#) stresses the importance of recognising intra-subjective meeting points in school spaces as they are instrumental in developing intergenerational relationships. The relationships forged in these spaces matter; both young people and adults want to be respected and valued ([Graham et al., 2022](#)). As highlighted above, relations in school space are based on togetherness, but equally they are based on control, which means that solidarity producing processes can also cause polarisation of people and hence reproduce inequalities ([Nurmi et al., 2011](#); [Oosterlynck et al., 2016](#)).

Adopting the categorisation by [Oosterlynck et al. \(2016\)](#), the various types of sources of solidarity discussed in this paper are (1) solidarities that draw on conflict; (2) solidarities that draw on shared values and norms; (3) solidarities that draw on interdependency. This categorisation highlights that solidarities have different purposes ([Oosterlynck et al., 2017](#): 5). When the source is conflict (or struggle) two visions are incompatible, thereby creating solidarities based on divisions. A good example of such solidarity is the solidarity felt and expressed within one's own social class through the disapprobation of other classes. When the source is shared values and norms, solidarity exists between people who share a moral understanding of society. Finally, when the source of solidarity is interdependency, shared benefits, rather than norms or divisions, strengthen solidarity. In what follows, staffs' perceptions of the sources of solidarity and the reasoning behind them are investigated. Specifying different types of sources helps to grasp the complex power negotiations in schools that are characterised by diversity of values.

Methodology

To investigate school staffs' understandings of solidarity at school, the study benefitted from a method that allowed the participants to distance themselves from real people. A fictional story completion method ([Clarke et al., 2019](#)) was adopted in this study for this purpose. The method requires the participant to write a story following a story stem a couple of sentences long. The stem crafted for this study had the following storyline: a pupil aged 15 was the sole survivor of a zombie apocalypse and in possession of a medicine with which the character can cure 10 others in the school area to build a post-apocalypse society.

The staff were instructed to continue the stem with two separate storylines (1) imagine yourself as the pupil and (2) become a trusted advisor to the pupil. The idea behind the story stems was that social dilemmas fundamental to forming solidarities can be reflected upon by the participants, and this, in combination with the absence of the word "solidarity", can enable participants to use individual sense-making resources rather than pre-conceived ideas about solidarity (see [Jennings et al., 2019](#)). As [Winston \(1995\)](#) emphasises, stories have never lost their value in communal frameworks and work particularly well when trying to comprehend complex community dynamics.

Before commencing the study, the research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, and research permission was granted by the local authority and the head of the

school. Written and oral information explained the ethical principles and practice of voluntariness, anonymity and ‘no harm’, and consent was obtained accordingly. The research was conducted in Finland in a culturally and socioeconomically diverse school. All the staff were invited to participate. Around half of the staff, 24 staff members in total, chose to participate. The data collection resulted in 48 completed stories by five men, 18 women and one participant who chose not to report their gender. The participants’ ages ranged between 20 and 61 years of age. 16 participants were teachers, five were teaching assistants, one was administrative staff, and two chose not to report their occupation.

The stories were collected one morning in the staff room before the day’s classes commenced. An anonymous electronic platform was used on which the participants wrote their stories, or the participants had the option to continue the story stems on paper. In addition, two staff members gave their answer in an oral story telling format, since it was their wish to do so. Only minimal instructions were deliberately given. The staff were simply instructed to continue the two stems. Data consisted of (1) stories where the staff assumed the pupils’ position (2) stories where the staff assumed the role of the pupils’ trusted advisor.

The length of stories ranged from 26 words at the shortest to 219 words in the longest story. Overall, the number of words in a single story averaged around one hundred. The average time used to write the two stories was 15 min, ranging from a couple of minutes to half an hour. The short length of stories supported the idea that fictional story completion method can give access to participants’ intuitive ideas because the stories are written quickly (Clarke et al., 2019).

Each participant wrote two stories, first imagining themselves as a pupil, and then from the staff perspective. The analysis focused on tensions between the two stories written by one participant. In the analysis, the stories were assigned to one of the three categories outlined earlier i.e. conflict, values and norms, interdependency. Table 1 presents an overview of the findings, which are explained further in the following section of the paper. The analysis revealed the staff members’ sources of spatial solidarities in the school area, the practice of solidarity and communication style to the pupil as an advisor (see Table 1). The table reflects the order in which the analysis was conducted. First, the researcher looked for compatibilities and incompatibilities between the two stories written by one and the same participant. Incompatibility meant that the two conceptions of solidarity could not co-exist. From there, the researcher proceeded to identify practices of solidarity and how these were communicated as an advisor.

In 12 participants’ stories the two understandings of solidarity were compatible. i.e. the pupils’ choices anticipated by the adult and the adult’s own understanding of solidarity were compatible. Out of the 12 compatible stories, nine participants perceived the adult as a collaborator, whereas three participants perceived solidarities as given via societal norms. 12 participants’ stories were not compatible as the adult imagined the pupil to be very different from themselves because of a generational difference. They did not trust the pupil and hence, as an advisor, dictated solidarities by

Table 1. Source of solidarity, practice and communication style.

Compatibility between story 1 and 2	Source of spatial solidarity in story	Share of total	Practice	Communication style as an advisor
Compatible 12	Interdependency Norms and values	9/24 3/24	Negotiation Moral integration	Open and trusting Neutral
Incompatible 12	Intergenerational conflict	12/24	Pupil as an object of adult decisions	Dictatorial

telling the pupil whom to choose. The sources of solidarity, practice and communication style will be discussed in detail in the next section, where ‘teenager’ refers to a participant positioning themselves as being a 15-year-old pupil, whereas ‘adult’ refers to a participant writing as ‘themselves’ as staff members advising the pupil.

Sources of solidarity in the stories

Interdependency

Nine participants emphasised intergenerational interdependency. In Story 1 the teenager was assumed by the participant to make reflective choices. This is particularly apparent in the pupils’ assumed ability to cognitively prepare for potential conflicts in advance by making considered decisions. For instance, Participant 13 imagined how the pupil would choose peers in the following way: “They [the two pupils] would never cause a conflict, so I can trust them in this sense, too, that we 10 survivors [adults and teens] would not break into smaller groups and start fighting among ourselves”. The extract illustrates the pupils’ expected ability to be able to minimise conflicts. It is also worth noting that the participant does not choose adults as cohesion builders, but teens. Teens were typically anticipated to have crucial social skills in the stories where the source of solidarity was categorised as interdependency. Hence, hierarchies from the pre-apocalypse society were not carried over into the new society.

When the source of solidarity was interdependency, the adult participant anticipated that the pupil would choose survivors that are not in the teen’s immediate circle of friends. This was another specific feature in this category. For instance, Participant 9 wrote from the pupils’ perspective:

I began to think of all the people in the school. All of a sudden Iina came to mind. She is in the scouts, smart and most of the time nice to everyone. She is not a friend of mine, but I get on well with her. And then [who else] ...Iivari. He can be annoying, but for some reason he comes to my mind. Yes, why not [choose him].

Similarly, Participant 10 anticipated that the teen would choose someone outside her own group of friends: “Elias, he moved here from Sweden [and] is not included by others. But I have always liked him”. The above extracts aptly illustrate that the participants expect the pupils to use reflective thinking.

As advisors the nine participants in the interdependency category used expressions like “we would need...”, “then I would advise...”, “I could help with...”, instead of telling the fictional young person what to do. In addition to trusting the pupil to make their own choices, the advisors in this story frame appeared respectful and warm towards the pupil, as the following extract shows: “Think what you would like to do, it’s not just about learning new things, [think] what would be fun. I would suggest you pick five friends, three teachers and the kitchen lady. I believe that you will have fun together” (Participant 14). The emphasis is not just on surviving but on wanting the pupil to enjoy themselves in the group of survivors. The adult encourages the young person to trust themselves. Similarly Participant 15 chose to trust the pupil when picking peers “...you know these young people best, You can make the choice”. The participant emphasises the respect she has for the young person also by writing you with a capital letter.

Norms and values

Unlike the stories where the source of solidarity is interdependency, in the stories where the source of solidarity was identified as norms and values, the three participants took the post-apocalypse society

as given in both stories. In other words, the new society would be a replica of the old one. The pupil and the adult make the same ‘right’ choices in Story 1 and in Story 2. To demonstrate the similarities extracts are presented from Participant 4, beginning with the anticipated teen choices in Story 1:

I suppose a couple of adults should be saved, so I will save the teachers that I believe are ok. I will save two of those...

...In addition, I want to make sure that there is plenty of intelligence in the future, so I will save the two best pupils, one girl and one boy. I also wish to add diversity to the mix, so I will save two pupils whose native tongue is other than Finnish.

As an advisor, Participant 4 instructs the pupil as follows:

I believe multiculturalism and diversity are enriching, so we need to save people from different backgrounds. A couple of adults would be useful...

...In the beginning we would need survival skills, and later, we would need skills based on intelligence. I believe that that it would be sensible to pick both females and males, so that we can procreate in the future...

In the above extracts societal norms are strongly reflected in both stories. The new society should include individuals from different backgrounds, and it should be comprised of men and women, so that shared values can be passed down to future generations. The most striking feature in this category was that pupils and staff were assumed to think the same and act the same. In the above extract the adult advisor puts strong emphasis on beliefs. In a nutshell, beliefs are assumptions about the world, and when the source of solidarity is norms and values, then, understandably, there is little reflection on decision making and reasoning. Rather, values and norms are taken as given, presumed to be shared.

The expectation of similar thinking is in contrast with the interdependency category, where the pupils were considered to be different from staff but still to have something essential to contribute to the new society in their own right, perhaps even changing old power structures. In one of the stories in the category of social norms and values, the advisor, Participant 4, rewards the pupil for making the right choices: “The pupil should be able save a couple of people she wants to save. She has managed to survive something that has endangered everybody else, so she deserves a reward”. The participant rewards the pupil for contributing a ‘good’ outcome. Typically of norm-driven choices, social actions are seen as leading to good or bad outcomes and good outcomes need to be rewarded.

Intergenerational conflict

Twelve participants used story frames that were assigned by the researcher to the category of intergenerational conflict. In this category the adults saw themselves as fundamentally different from young people and this created distrust toward the young. In these stories, solidarity was built in alliance with peers and was, hence, based on differences between generations. In Story 1, the pupils were largely anticipated to be loyal to their peer group as the following extract from Participant 1 illustrates: “Without any doubt I wish to wake up young people, because we share the same thoughts. Also, it is important for me to wake up those who are the same gender as me, because then we think alike even more”.

In addition, in these story frames the participants anticipated that the pupils would need authoritative adults to keep the chaos at bay “...the police will make sure that there is order”

(Participant 7) or “the head teacher and school social worker will be needed to resolve possible conflicts, so I would pick them” (Participant 17). This is in contrast to stories where the source of solidarity was interdependency, as in those stories the pupils were seen as capable of resolving disputes, also independently from adults.

The need for adult control is also present when the participant becomes the teen’s advisor. Instead of seeing the pupils as collaborators, adults are considered superior, as the following extract demonstrates: “... adults are the way to re-create the world and civilise new people into the ways of the world. These people have the education, experience and wisdom to make the world a better place” (Participant 3). Participant 20 advises the pupil to choose males, mostly adult men, and one woman for cooking:

...you need a group of men who can act when something dangerous happens and who are physically fit to cover long distances fast. Take at least one pupil with all-terrain vehicle, a couple of innovative persons, and then people who are good fun. One well-built man would do no harm, if situations should need brute force. If you think that food is a priority, the school cook would be a good choice. She fits the category of a fun person. And why would you choose me? Because I am the nicest teacher in the school?

What makes this source of solidarity different from interdependency, and also from values and norms, is the way adults did not trust the pupils to make their own choices. In other words, solidarities were dictated by the adult advisor. Typically, in these stories, the pupil cannot even choose peers because they, too, are chosen for them. In the following extract the peer was chosen by the adult on the basis of qualities valued by the adult: “Your friend Elsa. She is wise and healthy, so she will certainly do well in the new world” (Participant 5). Where the source of solidarity is intergenerational conflict, the adult might also justify choices according to advisors’ personal preferences, telling the pupil to pick a staff member only because the staff member is “a close teacher colleague” to the advisor (Participant 18). Hence, instead of sticking to the role of an advisor, the participants in this category dictated solidarities instead of relying on collaboration.

Discussion and conclusion

In this story completion study the school staff were asked to reinvent relations in school through fiction. To capture the complex power dynamics, the stories were written first from the pupil’s perspective and then from an adult’s perspective, as the participant assumed the role of an advisor to the pupil who they first imagined to be. As outlined in the theoretical background of this paper, the concept of spatial solidarity offered a useful framework for the study of intergenerational power relations as it acknowledges power struggle and negotiations on solidarity as being essential to solidarity formations (Oosterlynck et al., 2016, 2017). The findings support the idea that solidarities have three basic sources, namely interdependency, shared values and norms, and conflict (see Table 1), as outlined by Oosterlynck et al. (2016). Hence, communities need to be examined from multiple aspects as power relations are constantly changing (e.g., Oosterlynck et al., 2017; Oto and Smaller 2024; Schuermans and Debruyne, 2017; Woodrow, 2018).

When the source was interdependency, the pupil in Story 1 was expected by participants to be capable and hence make decisions. As advisors, these participants therefore collaborated with the pupil as they deemed the pupil trustworthy and capable of reflective thinking. As advisors the adults appeared well disposed towards the pupil. They acknowledged that teens have special capacities, both as individuals and as young people. This supports Cockburns (2007) idea which emphasises that children should be seen as partners in power. Different kinds of people are needed in

communities for humans to survive (see [Butler, 2004](#)). [Ibrahim and El Zaatari \(2020\)](#) highlight how staff-pupil relationships based on care, trust, respect, affect, openness and co-operation foster teacher accountability.

By contrast, in the stories where the source of solidarity was norms and values, the pupil was expected by participants to adhere to the norms and values considered important in Finnish society. For instance, the pupil in Story 1 was aware of gender equality and multicultural values. As advisors, these participants drew on the same values and social norms to advise the pupil to make choices. What was striking in this category of solidarity was that Story 1 and Story 2 were almost identical and in Story 2, as an advisor, the staff member gave very limited justification for the advice given. This is most likely because values and norms expected by society are taken as given, and hence there is no need to justify them. This was the least popular solidarity category in the analysis.

In the category of intergenerational conflict, the source of solidarity drew on conflict between pupils and staff. The pupil in Story 1 was expected by participants to form alliances based on similarity i.e. same age, same gender, and close friends. As advisors, these participants appeared to derive solidarity from mistrust, i.e. the young person needed to be told what to do. This resulted in the advisor taking over creating alliances with other adults. In addition, the advisor even chose the pupil's friend from among peers in some cases. This is in stark contrast to solidarities where the source was interdependency, where the advisor trusted the pupil to make their own choices because the pupil had specific knowledge about peers and the world in general. Intergenerational conflict strengthened established hierarchies and power positions.

However, intergenerational conflict does not have to be a problem per se. The recognition of such challenges can be used to inform discussions between pupils and staff. Understanding place-based intergenerational conflicts is hence important because they can produce potential breakthroughs in resolving such conflicts. Acknowledging power relations is much needed in schools because it allows pupil empowerment to take place ([Kirk et al., 2017](#)). [Oto and Smaller \(2024\)](#) found that adultism in schools can be effectively disrupted through acts of solidarity that support social justice. This is important because power imbalance in staff-pupil relations can produce inequalities ([Abdulhamed and Beattie, 2024](#)). In particular, pupils at risk of being stereotyped benefit from becoming active participants in bringing a positive change to the school environment ([Cureton and Aguinaldo, 2024](#)).

In a similar vein, solidarity based on shared values and norms may entail potential dangers if these norms and values act as an undercurrent. The staff in this study used values and norms with little reflection. [Tahsini et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight how gender norms in schools can even lead to violence if not critically reflected upon and challenged collectively. Creative spaces must entail some deviation from established norms (see [Bonetto et al., 2021](#)) and the manner in which an individual learns social norms varies ([Zhang et al., 2023](#)). In this study the number of staff who relied on social norms and values was unexpectedly low. [McKay and Mills \(2023\)](#) discovered how school heads' reflective position brings a high level of emotional complexity that is realised when interacting with pupils, staff and communities and these relations are important to the head's own wellbeing.

As regards methodological *contribution and limitations*, it can be argued that the findings are limited because of the fictional characters. Nevertheless, the results managed to capture participants' reasonings on solidarity as the characters in the stories operated within power relations that mimic real life. As [Clarke et al. \(2019\)](#) explain, the participants in this type of research must draw on personally and socially available resources to write a coherent story quickly (also [Jennings et al., 2019](#)). As the topic of solidarity is addressed indirectly, the method makes staff viewpoints visible on sensitive themes that might have been difficult to raise in an interview context. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that those staff members whose fictional characters were collaborative also

collaborate with young people in real life, while those staff members who in the stories emphasised norms, are more likely to be norm driven.

Another limitation is that due to the small size of the data, generalizations based on age and gender cannot be made. In addition, the transferability of these findings to other educational contexts is challenging as systems and cultures differ significantly. Still, comparative studies indicate that pupil's wellbeing is increased across the board in those schools that pay attention to staff-pupil co-operation and aim to treat young people fairly (see [Marquez and Main 2021](#)).

The key *practical implication* of this study is that the three sources of solidarity can serve to guide people working with young people in institutional settings, such as schools, to identify sources of solidarity. The types of solidarity outlined in this study offer staff a tool for critical self-reflection by highlighting how practices of solidarity can be communicated. Practicing solidarity negotiations in class can open two-way learning processes that disrupt stereotypes not conducive to solidarity ([Oosterlynck et al., 2016](#)). Democracies rely on people's ability to overcome differences and if adults establish solidarities with young people, this increases pupils' confidence in engaging with democratic practices (see also [Värri, 2014](#)). The cultural conditions in schools hence need to be critically reflected upon if pupil participation and wellbeing are to be achieved as opposed to being talked about in rhetorical speeches ([Graham et al., 2022](#)).

The key *theoretical implication* of this study is that the types of solidarity discussed in this paper can transform intergenerational relations in school by recognising value in difference rather than sameness when aiming to establish solidarities. [Oosterlynck et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight that recognising and respecting difference is a crucial element in democracy and power struggles around solidarity can be made visible by the concept of spatial solidarity. [Värri \(2014\)](#) argues that schools need to go beyond the existing norms to imagine possibilities. This type of moral imagination is needed now more than ever, as polarization is on the increase. [Crook \(2021\)](#) argues that rich intergenerational relationships and learning intergenerational participation are needed in schools if contemporary young people are expected to be interested in building a just society. This paper supports the argument that adultism can obstruct or discourage young people from making an impact on their social environment ([Wall, 2025](#)).

Solidarity can be used as a conceptual tool for reimagining power relations and creating a society of the kind in which one wants to live. [Torbjörnsson and Molin \(2015\)](#) importantly point out that pupils tend to think about future related challenges as individual challenges rather than collective challenges requiring intergenerational collaboration. In addition, as [Jessop \(2018\)](#) aptly points out, there is a danger that children and young people become protagonists for different ideological causes if adult ideologies are not reflected upon. The results of this study are that adult-centric thinking may dictate solidarities in the school environment, but interdependency as a source of solidarity has a genuine potential for renewing power-relations and encouraging genuine participation and wellbeing. Youth engagement in schools needs strategic development ([Jones and Deutsch, 2011](#)). Hence, adopting a strategy that aims to increase solidarity between staff and pupils can have a concrete impact on school bonding and community wellbeing (see also [Long et al., 2021](#)).

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Ethical considerations

The research has gone through the ethical review process by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region (<https://www.tuni.fi/en/research/responsible-science-and-research/research-integrity/ethics-committee-of-the-tampere-region>), approval number 11/2023.

Consent to participate

Informed verbal consent was obtained from all the participants.

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Research data are not shared.

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