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Professional paper

RECOGNITION OF PEER VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL – A CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores peer violence in schools, emphasizing the role of school culture, teachers, and students in recognizing and addressing this issue. It defines peer violence as any form of physical, psychological, sexual, material, or online violence where a child targeted by the violence feels threatened. The article distinguishes between direct and indirect peer violence, addressing both physical and verbal aggression. It underscores the crucial role of teachers in creating a safe environment, recognizing signs of violence, and implementing preventive measures. The article emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to problem-solving, involving students, aggressors, and bystanders while promoting a culture of zero tolerance for violence.

Keywords: peer violence, student, teacher, school.

INTRODUCTION

School culture is comprised of beliefs and values that a school holds and advocates. These expectations, positions, and values must be clear to facilitate the monitoring and maintenance of school culture. School culture is a fundamental factor influencing the level of violence and disruptive behavior in schools overall (Pečjak, 2015). From the first day a child joins peers, whether in kindergarten, on the playground, or at school, they learn collaboration and assertion. In such peer groups, there are always children who are weaker and callously targeted by others. On the other hand, some are bolder and stronger, and other children fear or even avoid them (Habbe, 2000). "Peer relationships can be a source of joy, support, and satisfaction in school and beyond. However, they can also be a source of great distress and represent an extremely painful experience. Peer violence is a phenomenon that represents a negative extreme on this continuum" (Košir, 2013, p. 70). There is direct and indirect violence, which must be differentiated. Direct violence involves a fairly open and visible attack on the victim, while indirect violence involves social isolation and exclusion from the group (Olweus, 1995).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the article is to present peer violence in schools by reviewing relevant literature and synthesizing these findings. Additionally, it aims to define the roles of teachers and students in addressing peer violence.

METHODOLOGY

The article is a theoretical discussion on peer violence in schools and the roles of teachers and students in recognizing it. The objectives include:

1. Defining peer violence
2. Identifying forms of peer violence in schools
3. Presenting the roles of teachers and students in recognizing peer violence in schools

DEFINITION OF PEER VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL

In various definitions, the terms aggression and violence appear simultaneously, but these terms are not always clearly distinguished or explained

within the definitions (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009). Aggression, in the broadest sense, represents an active approach to the environment and expresses the original meaning of the word “aggređi,” which means to approach or come closer. It encompasses all forms of movement, certain emotions such as anger and rage, and also physical violence against others. Aggression involves causing harm to another organism or a reaction aimed at harming another living organism (Pušnik, 1996; Pušnik, 1999).

“Peer violence is any form of physical, psychological, sexual, material, or online violence where a child targeted by peers feels threatened” (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2016, p. 5). Violence can be described as the misuse of power in various forms. For a more precise understanding of the term violence, we come to the following definition: violence is a learned but inappropriate behavioral response to feelings of fear or anger (Munc, 2010). Peer violence occurs when a student is repeatedly exposed to aggressive behavior or inappropriate actions caused by their peer or a group of peers over an extended period (Pečjak, 2015). Peer violence is a conscious, intentional, and repetitive behavior, including aggressive, manipulative, and exclusionary actions by one or more individuals against one or more individuals who are weaker (physically, psychologically, or socially) than the aggressor. Peer violence is aggressive behavior that is deliberate (not accidental or a result of play) and involves a power imbalance. Violence often occurs continuously (Pečjak, 2015; Pušnik, 1996).

Negative acts of peer violence include intentional harm or causing discomfort through physical means or words, including vulgar language and intentional exclusion from a group. This category also includes psychological torment, beating, preventing a child from participating in various activities, forcing a child into humiliating behaviors, and so on (Pušnik, 1996). Kristančič (2002) emphasizes that this is a specific form of violence called “bullying.” It involves peer intimidation, violence, teasing, abuse, threats, mistreatment, harassment, and torture. Two main individuals always appear in this term: the victim and the aggressor, and both can be individuals or groups, with various combinations possible. It is characteristic that there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. Attacks can be prolonged, lasting for months or even years.

Most peer violence occurs in or around schools, on the way to or from school. Spaces in schools where violence is most prevalent include restrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, hallways, and dressing rooms (Aničić et al., 2002). In modern times, a very common environment for violence is also the online environment,

which emerged with the development of the internet, and proliferated with social networks.

Regardless of where violence occurs, according to Košir (2013), two forms of peer violence can be roughly distinguished. The first is direct peer violence, which involves physical and verbal violence (strikes, kicks, taking property, insults, threats, and similar). The second form is called indirect peer violence, characterized by the manipulation of friendships to harm others through behaviors such as social exclusion and spreading of rumors or lies about an individual. Munc (2010) explains that physical violence will be recognized as the first, as it is the only form of violence that many people know and recognize, and is also the most visible since it can have visible consequences on the body. Physical violence occurs when someone uses their physical strength against another, causing disproportionate pain, injury, and humiliation. Physical abuse includes hitting, kicking, hair pulling, pushing, pinching, biting, and other forms of aggressive physical behavior towards another person.

“Every physical abuse is also emotional abuse” (Kristančič, 2002, p. 128). Therefore, the next two common forms are psychological and verbal violence. Pečjak (2015) estimates that this type of violence is an attack on an individual’s “inner self.” The goal is to harm the individual targeted by the attack without physical signs. “In this form of violence, the perpetrator has constant negative attitudes toward the other person, devalues, ridicules, and humiliates them” (Kristančič, 2002, p. 137). In this case, we talk about bullies, for whom, according to Košir (2013), myths circulate that they are usually rejected students, have no close friends, and have low self-esteem and self-respect. It is essential to emphasize that violent students do not represent a homogeneous group.

Verbal violence is the most widespread and overlooked form of violence. Roughly, according to Munc (2010), it can be divided into six major categories: nicknames, shouting, insults, mockery, threats, and harassment.

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN RECOGNIZING PEER VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL

Schools undoubtedly have significant opportunities for detecting and preventing peer violence. The institution itself must cultivate an environment that does not tolerate such behavior, establish a prevention system, and be prepared with measures if violence occurs. Teachers serve as role models for children, so their attitude toward others is crucial, as students observe them and learn from them (Košir, 2013; Pušnik, 1996). When violence occurs, the school needs to

respond both at the institutional level and as a whole, at the class level (various activities, discussions, role-playing, etc.), and at the individual level (individual discussions between aggressors and victims, discussions between parents of aggressors and victims, etc.) (Olweus, 1995). A teacher must be sensitive to the occurrence of peer violence, meaning they should be able to observe events, listen, recognize calls for help, identify forms of violence, recognize the characteristics of the phenomenon and those involved, pay attention to their behavior, responses, and communication, and continuously supplement their knowledge (Pušnik, 1999). When a teacher detects peer violence, immediate response and intervention are necessary regarding the student who is the victim, the aggressive student, and the entire remaining peer group (Košir, 2013).

Upon identifying peer violence in the school, it is crucial to acknowledge it to effectively plan measures to reduce this problem. Initially, students need to be made aware of violence and its consequences through various means. Other staff members should also be informed, and it is beneficial to organize a discussion session for parents on this topic. Developing an internal policy for addressing peer violence involving all three mentioned groups is essential. The rules should be clearly articulated, the definition of violence specific, and sanctions predefined. Discussions should involve both individuals and groups, including observers of violence. Emphasize that each specific incident is a shared problem, and thus, it is resolved collectively. Efforts should be made to establish a culture of zero tolerance for violence (Aničić et al., 2002). "We must set good demands, goals, and boundaries for children" (Rutar Leban, 2011, p. 53). Violence in an educational institution is strongly linked to the conditions in the local community and society in general. Therefore, the school must have a close connection with various interest groups in its environment and collectively address the issue of violence (Habbe, 2000).

Košir (2013, p. 89) also assesses that a crucial message to convey to children or students is that all problems arising from peer violence are solvable and should, therefore, be discussed. Children should be encouraged to talk about peer violence to someone they trust and not perceive it as tattling. According to Elliot (2002), one effective strategy for recognizing peer violence is to install special mailboxes where a child can submit a note presenting the problem of peer violence through a drawing or text. The worst response a teacher can use in dealing with peer violence, as emphasized by Dekleva (1996), is ignoring the problem.

A particular challenge in recognizing and dealing with violence is teaching students themselves about it. Students must internalize zero tolerance for

violence, recognize it, and know how to appropriately protect themselves and others. They must be aware of ways to help.

Identifying victims of violence is quite challenging since they often do not like to talk about the violence they experience. It must be realized that victims are often under some threat from the aggressor. Therefore, a student who we believe could be a victim of violence should never be overly harassed with potentially uncomfortable questions. Statements about whom they dislike, hate, or fear can often help us identify the aggressor (Kristančič, 2002). Teachers must listen to students, believe them, encourage them to talk to someone they trust about peer violence, and not perceive it as tattling. Students should also listen to each other, pay attention to changes in behavior, or more closely monitor each other's posts or writings. "The characteristics of victims are generally shyness, sensitivity, caution, introversion, fearfulness, and crying. During an attack, they withdraw and do not attempt or do not know how to defend themselves. If we are good observers, we can recognize a victim of violence based on the listed characteristics" (Habbe, 2000, p. 45). Being sensitive to recognizing peer violence means that a teacher is capable of observing events, listening, and hearing what children say to each other, and communicate with us. Recognizing calls for help, identifying forms of violence, recognizing the characteristics of the phenomenon and those involved, being attentive to factors acting as risk factors, and paying attention to students' behavior, responses, and communication are all crucial. It is also essential for a teacher to seek help if they cannot assist in a particular situation (Pušnik, 2004).

Since victims of violence find it challenging to speak about violence, teachers in schools must also be attentive to whether a student is afraid to come and go to school, always stays close to a teacher, has damaged personal belongings, has undergone a noticeable behavior change, withdraws or stutters, looks nervous, agitated, has unexplained bruises, abrasions, or other bodily injuries, or refuses to engage in conversation. Therefore, in discovering a potential victim of violence, we must be attentive to all the signs mentioned, learn to observe the student, and establish a closer connection with them (Aničić et al., 2002).

CONCLUSION

In the event of peer violence in school, it is crucial to respond to it. Teachers and students play a significant role in recognizing and providing initial responses to such incidents. The school as an institution and the teachers employed there must strive to create a safe and confidential environment. Only in this way will

a student who is a victim of violence be willing to speak up. This is the key and most important task of the victim – to speak about the violence with an adult. Miller (2000) also highlights another important task for teachers, which is to teach students to cope with problems and develop skills appropriate for that.

It is necessary to involve other students who are merely observers of the violence and the aggressor in discussions and resolutions. The issue of violence needs to be addressed comprehensively at the level of all professionals and students (victims, aggressors, and observers), including parents. As emphasized by Aničić et al. (2002), every school must formulate its own strategy for preventing violence. According to Lešnik Mugnaioni, Koren, Logaj and Brejc (2009), schools are ultimately obligated to prevent peer violence, as various documents, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, bind them to this responsibility.

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PREPOZNAVANJE VRŠNJAČKOG NASILJA U ŠKOLI – IZAZOV ZA UČENIKE I UČITELJE

Ovaj članak istražuje vršnjačko nasilje u školama, naglašavajući ulogu školske kulture, učitelja i učenika u prepoznavanju i rješavanju ovog problema. Vršnjačko nasilje se definira kao svaki oblik fizičkog, psihičkog, seksualnog, materijalnog ili online nasilja pri kojem se dijete koje je meta nasilja osjeća ugroženo. U članku se razlikuje izravno i neizravno vršnjačko nasilje, pri čemu se govori o fizičkoj i verbalnoj agresiji. Ističe se ključna uloga učitelja u stvaranju sigurnog okruženja, prepoznavanju znakova nasilja i provođenju preventivnih mjera. Članak naglašava važnost sveobuhvatnog pristupa rješavanju problema, uključujući učenike, agresore i promatrače uz promicanje kulture nulte tolerancije prema nasilju.

Ključne riječi: vršnjačko nasilje, učenik, učitelj, škola.