

THE BULLYING PHENOMENON IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *Articles is aiming to conduct a systematic review of scientific literature on bullying phenomenon and tries to analyse its manifestation in Romanian schools. Bullying is a global phenomenon, usually neglected in schools around the world. The impact of the bullying is determined by the serious consequences not only for children who are victimized by aggressors, but also for those who initiate aggression. This is an important issue that will not be solved until a holistic approach (parents, teachers, specialists, local community, etc.) will address the reasons why children humiliate and intimidate others, and will identify the causes that trigger such behaviours. With the right guidance and training, children can acquire necessary skills to solve their problems instead of managing them by intimidating others. In order to provide such education and to successfully eliminate the aggression in schools, we must determine the causes and effects of school bullying. The most common causes of such behaviour can be the lack of empathy, egocentrism, pride, the superficiality of human relationships, and especially the exposure, assumption, imitation of similar patterns of behaviour - most of the time in physical or virtual environments.*

Key words: *bullying; prevention; Romanian schools; strategies.*

1. Introduction

In the fast-paced modern world, the informational leap may have negative effects on the child's emotional development. Children who do not have enough time to relax, enjoy their childhood, spend quality time with their family and friends can become very anxious, stressed, and can therefore develop violent behaviours. Children have different needs, such as being able to relax, play with friends and belong to a group and be accepted by them. Protecting children from all forms of violence, including abuse and neglect, is a truly global phenomenon and needs to be addressed by academics (M. Constantinescu, et al., 2017). Frustration due to the failure to meet those needs may result in aggressive behaviours, which subsequently turn into bullying behaviours. Studies (American Society for the Positive Care of Children | American SPCC) show that the incidence of aggressors is higher in dysfunctional families. However, a dysfunctional family does not always mean that the child will become an aggressor. However, a large number of bullies come from homes where there is little affection and openness. Often children witnesses to domestic violence, family of friends, brothers or other family members. Therefore,

children adopt such behavioural patterns and imitate their colleagues at school. Although aggressors often display an attitude of self-confidence and superiority, they are deeply insecure and inferior to other people. They treat others with contempt in order to feel better. Most children act aggressively non-intentionally; they just follow the example of behaviours of parents / friends / other negative models from the physical or virtual environment. When the aggressor does not feel resilient, he becomes overwhelmed by power and intensifies or prolongs bullying behaviours. The offense itself, "false power", becomes rewarding for them (attention gain and popularity, and the ability to make others fear them, the desire for power) and thus without specialized intervention, the bullying behaviours will continue. These inappropriate changes reinforce the aggressive behaviour pattern and encourage the aggressor to become harasser. Another psychological factor for bullying behaviours is the poor ability of children to adjust their emotions. Whenever people become angry and irritated, they learn to effectively manage their emotions to avoid injuring others. However, some children cannot control their feelings. In fact, anything can determine and make them to react excessively.

In this study, we proposed to define the concept of bullying and to make a qualitative analysis of the bullying phenomenon, to understand the causes, motives and mechanisms that trigger the occurrence of this phenomenon, to understand the magnitude of this phenomenon, what are the forms of bullying that can be identified in the educational environment and to develop some ways to prevent and combat bullying in schools.

8. Definitions and conceptual framework

For the proposed sociological investigation, it is absolutely necessary to clarify and define clearly the concept of bullying. "Bullying" is an Anglo-Saxon term, taken up in the Romanian Specialized literature without being translated; the close term in Romanian is harassment. Early research on school aggression that drew attention to its impact on students and the frequency of its daily occurrence were conducted in the Scandinavian countries (studies by E. Debarbieux, 1996, 1999). This concept is still a subject of academic debates, but it has definitely drawn attention to the victims (young people still in development and training, moment of psycho-emotional vulnerability) and its risks to young people. Our article is going to present the concept itself, by analysing the existing studies on the incidence of the phenomenon. Then we will focus on the consequences of this type of victimization. Defining the term "bullying" and its main indicators will be useful to develop a methodology to capture this phenomenon as accurately as possible and to develop effective and realistic recommendations for prevention and intervention in situations of bullying. In order to combat aggression, it is important to understand, identify and recognize the phenomenon of bullying, harassment, aggression, violence.

Bullying is often seen as a subcategory of peer aggression. Three criteria distinguish bullying from other types of aggression: power imbalance, repetition or duration of negative actions, and a deliberate will of injury. The research was initially directed to physical and verbal forms of harassment (Olweus, 1991; Olweus, 1993). Social or indirect forms of aggression have been identified in the nineties (Olweus, 1991; Olweus, 1993). In the 2000s, digital aggression, more commonly expressed as "Cyberbullying" was identified (Smith et al., 2002). Some researchers have addressed the impact of aggression on academic outcomes, but the findings differ. Glew et al. (2005) found that victims and victims of the victims (students who are involved in both victims and aggressors) had fewer scores on academic achievement measures. Smith and Sharp (1998) define this phenomenon as "systematic abuse of power" which involves repeated abuse of power in relationships (Smith, 2014). Gladden et al. (2014, p. 17) define bullying as "any unwanted aggressive behaviour(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm". "Aggression is a long, mental or physical violence conducted by an individual or a group against a person who cannot defend in this situation (Roland, 1989, in Mellor, 1990, 1991). The aggression action in the bullying behaviour has certain characteristics that distinguish it from a quarrel or a fight between colleagues or friends. Aggressors use physical force, have access to private information or popularity to intimidate, control, or harm others. Harassment is done deliberately with intent to injure, to produce psycho-emotional and physical damage; is repeated over a period of time, so it is not a single-situation behaviour, and is a misuse of power in the sense that victims have difficulty in defending or protecting against it. Theorists conceptualize it as a subcategory of aggression, where bullying is the assertion of power through aggression or intimidation (Craig, Pepler et al., 2000), being an abuse of social power (Smith, 2002). If the victim, the aggressed person repels or, at least, is not vulnerable and can defend himself, it can no longer be described as bullying behaviour, but rather is already an inter-aggressional behaviour.

Researchers have identified several types of aggression, which we synthesized as following: verbal (nickname, teasing, sarcasm, spread of false rumours / gossip, abusive or threatening comments, negative observations about culture, religion, skin colour, family, house, sexual orientation, etc. of a person); the release of negative comments about the appearance of one's / the physical body, clothing (making observations about disability or physical condition); isolation (unfriendly, unfair attitude, exclusion from the group, forcing to make friendship with certain persons); physical behaviours (hitting, pushing, engaging, harassing, applying physical beating, hiding or destroying a person, etc.), aggressive gestures (offensive and threatening gestures), harassment on-line (hate emails or threats). The main types of aggression (as mentioned in *Anti-Bullying Policy of the Our Lady of*

Mount Caramel Catholic Primary School, 2015) is based on: appearance (e.g. hair colour, body shape / weight, clothing) race / ethnicity (e.g. racial teasing, racial gestures), gender identity (e.g. transsexuality, gender identity other than gender-specific norms), home (classroom, free school meals, care), sexual orientation (e.g. lesbian, homosexual or bisexual (LGB) (real or perceived) (homophobia). This phenomenon must be seen as a community problem and not just a problem of the child, parent or teacher. Bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour that is systematically and continuously carried out by a person or a group of young people against a child/person who is alone and is relatively incapable of defending himself (O'Moore, Minton, 2004).

Bullying is often considered a phenomenon because the various manifestations of recurrent violence among colleagues go beyond the school environment, having consequences that extend to other areas or contexts such as family and / or society (Olweus, 2004). Also, bullying is not specific to a local community, a country, but encompasses most of the world's states, becoming an international problem. Data and studies are significant to confirm that the extent of this phenomenon at national and international level requires a closer analysis to study the phenomenon and understand how it is triggered, how it manifests, what is its impact in order to identify effective ways to prevent and reduce it.

9. The aetiology of the bullying phenomenon

Rashmi Shetgiri (2013) analysed and summed up numerous studies identifying a number of risk factors that could trigger bullying behaviours. These risk factors are related to the child, family / parents, group of friends / colleagues, community. In this article, we will list some of factors contributing to bullying behaviours such as: younger age of the child, presence of depression and / or other mental health problems, or emotional / developmental / behavioural problems, low academic performance, addictions, use of unacceptable substances, exposure to abuses and violence, high levels of anger of the child, and weak self-control and emotional control, use of bodily punishment by parents, lack of communication or communication difficulties between parents and children, parental anger, lack of parental supervision, frequent and violent conflicts within family, bad relationships with school colleagues, negative influences from colleagues, provenance from underprivileged economic environments or "insecure" neighbourhoods, etc.

The study undertaken by S. N. Georgiou (2008) and published in *The British Journal of Educational Psychology* states that maternal and paternal depression can influence the perpetuation of child harassment. Maternal depression is associated with aggression. This relationship can also be explained by negative interactions and also associated with aggression. In general, interactions between depressed mothers and their children are more hostile, irritable, critical, as confirmed by studies by I. Fihrer et al. (2004). A study (D. P. Farrington, 1993) found that children who were

tortured by their fathers when they were in school were more likely to have children who had been assaulted. Certainly undeniable a warm, affectionate environment will lower the chances of developing and learning aggressive, bullying behaviours. "Intolerable tensions between the individual and his home environment are the results of suffering and dangers experienced by the child. Instead of a joyful and collaborative attitude, the young child's attitude will be a fight, an attack or a waiver" (M. Constantinescu et al., 2016, pp. 1347).

The phenomenon of "bullying" has long exceeded acceptable borders, being increasingly present in Romanian society, even in the school environment, where children are supervised and where they operate in a microsystem. Bullying is not only a characteristic phenomenon of Romanian school, as we also find it internationally regardless of race, religion, gender, social status, physical status or age. This problem has been considered a phenomenon that has reached a global level. Mexico holds the world's first place on intimidation cases in compulsory education (kindergarten, primary school, gymnasium), according to OECD data (OECD, 2014). This problem is social and present; it has even become to be considered a global health problem because the school should promote a safe atmosphere in which children develop harmoniously. Some of the consequences of this problem in schools have led to poor school performance and / or school drop-out, and this situation affects not only school life but can affect other areas such as family life, community; an example of this is increased suicidal attempts of those who have been victims of bullying. Of course, suicide is an extreme image of what can cause this kind of dynamics among students.

The phenomenon of violence in schools has become one of the main objectives of public policies in recent decades. Europe and the United States are a reference point for the first major violence experiences worldwide: mass murder and suicide in the child and adolescent population. The growing influence of technology, anti-social groups, the use of illegal substances, as well as the poor development of community-based protection factors and the prevention of harassment behaviours can be identified as possible causes of the rise of bullying. These events have led to an increase in the number and new forms of aggression and violent actions in schools. In addition, the fast pace of the society we live in and the information flow, especially with regard to social environments, has made it difficult to identify and empower professionals to stand out when an aggression action occurs. Several studies (O'Moore, Minton, 2004; Dillon, 2015) show that a global trend of the current generation of children is to have more emotional problems than in the past. Research has been undertaken as a need to investigate the phenomenon from a different perspective, in a different context and to identify the best ways to solve the problem. It is well-known that aggression against children, especially those in residential care institutions, has a great amplitude and, despite the importance and extent of this phenomenon, is not diminishing, but on the contrary it is expanding. Moreover, it is important to update all the behaviours identified as aggression in our

days, because of the rapid development of technology, new and less known forms have been identified, such as cyberbullying. We strongly believe that, by training specialists working with children (teachers, educators, social workers), knowing how to identify different forms of intimidation and gaining skills and abilities to combat any aggression in schools will reduce the number of acts of bullying in the school community. Studies (M. Constantinescu, C. Constantinescu, 2012) identified the important factors of increased aggression in schools - teachers' poor communication skills with students, insufficient training in conflict management and combating violence, low motivation of the professor. The importance of developing good communication skills will eliminate frustration by satisfying individual needs (expressing and understanding each other), will validate the child and the parent (I recognize and accept you, I listen and understand you) that will imply acceptance and social inclusion (C. Dumitru, 2016) and will decrease the number of challenging and aggressive behaviours. These facts justify the need to develop and carry on in-service teacher education, to raise public awareness of all forms of intimidation of children, to develop activities to prevent these aggressions, and to promote children's rights for a safe and secure environment; to initiate programs to reduce the level of aggression in schools. J. Dillon (2015) draws attention to the importance of initiating prevention programs and the objective of empowering teachers with the tools needed to develop a culture "without aggression, without hatred" in schools and communities, because people are, in general, good and want to have positive relationships with others.

10. Policies and strategies for handling and combat bullying

Policies against bullying and harassment have been formulated (M. O'Moore, SJMinton, 2004) to minimize the risk of aggression by raising awareness and providing prevention strategies, and by providing concrete techniques to deal with any harassment behaviours in the event of their occurrence. The European strategy against bullying, recently summed up by the European Anti-Bullying Network (EAN), "Build the Future, Stop Bullying", adopts an inclusive approach to schooling. Anti-bullying policies aim to prevent aggression throughout the school community, including school staff, teachers, students, families, volunteers. European schools (Smith, et al., 2002) are legally bound to have anti-bullying policy, but the reports confirm the lack of coverage in important areas. In line with the European Anti-Harassment Strategy, schools should develop a harassment policy through strategies and measures to encourage good, positive behaviour and prevent any form of aggression among pupils and staff. Anti-bullying policies aim to prevent other negative consequences of aggression such as school failure and other inappropriate behaviours in terms of social relationships, self-affirmation, self-realization. Anti-bullying policies should include a set of clear measures on what is an act of intimidation, how to identify it, how to report it, investigate it and record

it, the roles of each actor involved (students, teachers, parents, community); and developing conflict resolution strategies and conflict management strategies, as well as preventing aggression behaviours.

Currently, there are no anti-bullying policies based on primary care, rigorously assessed. Some school interventions designed to reduce bullying developed, implemented and studied in Asia, Europe and North America, were systematized by D. P. Farrington et al. (2009). The phenomenon of bullying violates written and unwritten norms of society and the school community, enrolling in the category of negative deviance - defies the norms of the community and damages individual freedoms; includes social intimidation interactions using a specific offensive language and creates a social context of inequality of power where the victim is subjected to abusive socio-emotional treatment by the aggressor. Objectives of antisocial behaviour include actions that threatens the well-being of the person (physical, verbal, ethnic bullying), actions against other people's goods and personal belongings (criminal bullying) and actions against social coexistence (social bullying by exclusion and damage to a person's image). This type of school bullying is reported to the category of perpetrators and are included in the juvenile delinquency perimeter. In the case of this kind of aggression, it is possible to act legally, if the identity of the aggressor is known. The anti-social behaviours of bullying, that exceed the age of young age, cannot be included in the category of school bullying, but under the category of crimes or immoral acts - in which case they are not detected by social control. The criminal nature of the bullying actions overlaps with the deviant act during schooling after the age of 14, when the child responds criminally, but the categories of the act are restricted to the aggressive physical attacks, threats or dispossession of personal property. If the victims / aggressors are minors, they are accompanied by parents or legal guardians to respond criminally. There are states that have anti-bullying policies and laws that provide procedure for reporting, prevention and intervention, and schools are increasingly required to implement their own harassment prevention programs. Soon it will be the case of Romanian schools, because there are already legislative initiatives that prohibit behaviours that consist of psychological violence in the educational establishments and in all spaces for education and training. It is important to know that bullying takes place in every school, regardless of the type of bullying or scale at which the phenomenon occurs, but what matters and what makes a significantly difference between schools is how schools are managing it in everyday practice. In Romania, actions of raising awareness and promotion of activities to combat bullying started more organised in 2012.

National studies in Romania on the phenomenon of bullying in schools were not a priority, the phenomenon being reduced at the level of general signs and descriptions. Existing studies are directed at school violence (e.g. UNICEF, 2006). Dan Olweus, the most recognized bullying expert, claims that "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative

actions on the part of one or more other students). Research suggests that different forms of support can mitigate the effects of various types of bullying on psycho-emotional development. However, there are very few studies that have examined how different forms of social support could mitigate the impact of bullying on the mental health of the child and adolescent. Some studies (K. A. Fanti, 2012) suggest that family social support can be an important factor in protecting against the negative effects of bullying on the student health.

In view of the harmful effects of bullying behaviours, effective prevention and intervention efforts must be a priority. However, studies that investigate effective prevention and intervention strategies to combat bullying are not so numerous. Several studies addressing bullying prevention efforts suggest that attention should be focused on increasing empathy and adolescent self-esteem, reducing teenagers' problematic behaviours, promoting and cultivating quality parenting relationships, and reducing online time. For example, researchers who conducted a study (quoted by Charisse L. Nixon, 2014) with teenagers in Turkey found that those teenagers who were less empathetic were more at risk of engaging in bullying acts. The results of their study have shown that the combined effect of affective behaviour (e.g., the experience of someone else's feelings) and cognitive empathy (e.g. consideration of others) played an essential role in influencing adolescent engagement in bullying. Specifically, empathy about adolescent activation was linked to less negative behaviour. The results of this study suggest that future efforts to prevent and intervene will be geared towards increasing adolescent affection (for example, my friend's feelings do not affect me) and cognitive empathy (for example, "I understand why my friend might behave like this when this happens ") in an effort to reduce participation in aggression.

Recent findings also suggest that prevention efforts aimed at reducing bullying should address modalities of working on students' self-esteem as well as targeting difficult behaviours. The findings from the above-mentioned studies have shown that a low self-esteem of students will increase the risk of being subsequently involved in bullying behaviours both as a perpetrator and as a target. In addition, the more students have problematic behaviours (e.g. smoking, delinquency, aggressive behaviours), the more they will engage in various types of bullying behaviours. Based on these results, we can recommend to professional working with students to focus on students with such difficult behaviours as well as other psycho-emotional features mentioned above.

With regard to parenting, the article suggest that health professionals and educators should work to help students and their parents establish close relationships and care that include adult monitoring. Surely, agents of socialization (e.g. friends, family, and school adults) play an important role in child development and the formation of pro-social behaviours in students. The results of previous studies mentioned in our articles are very important and bring a series of significant data that can more effectively direct all prevention and intervention actions into

bullying behaviours. R. Shetgiri (2013) is making an interesting analysis of the hurdles prevention and prevention programs implemented and identifies some key features that can impact on the effectiveness of an anti-bullying program. We will list some of these features: programs should be based on the Olweus principles of a bullying prevention program; programs that include parent involvement; programs with a longer duration of intervention. The above author identifies other important components of anti-bullying programs: team meetings and meetings with parents, firm disciplinary methods, information for parents, teacher training, classroom management, classroom rules, anti-bullying school policy, etc.

11. Conclusion

Bullying is a global phenomenon with devastating effects on the socio-emotional development of our children. Teachers, parents, children and society need to be aware of this phenomenon and to know how to identify, report, and protect themselves from bullying. Intimidation is unacceptable because it affects the social and emotional well-being of students and should not be tolerated in our class, school, and society. National studies in Romania on the phenomenon of bullying in schools are very few and often they are limited to general signals and descriptions, but this has to change and bullying phenomena need to become a priority, because in schools where there is bullying, there will be no academic performance and achievement. Our study has succeeded in achieving its goals, because we have explored the conceptual notions of bullying, we have been able to identify and describe various types of bullying and to understand the difference between aggression and bullying. We have also studied national and international research to find out what has been achieved so far in this area to build some understanding of the causes and identify some intervention directions. The main purpose of the study to explore the phenomena of bullying has identified the alarming fact that many students are affected by bullying either directly or indirectly (as spectators). In order to have an effective response to bullying, we need to focus, reflect and discuss on bullying understanding and attitudes towards this phenomenon. Reflections on the results of the research conducted on the analysis of the already implemented intervention programs confirm that effective anti-bullying interventions cannot be limited only to the class, to a lesson or to the activities based on the curriculum. Anti-bullying initiatives cannot work alone, without the commitment of school administration, teachers and educators. Involvement of parents plays an important role. There is a need for an inclusive approach, not just an action that is limited to a school regulation, but rather a set of actions that will really be put into practice.

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