

PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF BULLYING IN SCHOOLS. WAYS OF PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

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Abstract: *In recent decades, bullying has become an undesirable but increasingly prevalent reality of the education systems, of schools around the world. Taking into consideration the destructive effects of any kind of aggression on children and adolescents, it is necessary to correlate the efforts of all the factors involved in the school activity, to prevent or intervene in order to reduce the effects of bullying on the emotional, physical and well-being of those involved. The present study aims to identify the specifics of this phenomenon, viewed from the perspective of some theoreticians and practitioners in the field of education, during the process of training, respectively of some students-future teachers. The incursion made in the literature of the problem aimed at substantiating the theoretical aspects on the stated topic, and the investigative approach, carried out on a group of subjects consisting of 93 students from the Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, the first year of studies – bachelor and the first year in psycho-pedagogical training program. It was based on the capitalization of the results of their activity regarding both the diagnosis of the bullying phenomenon in the Romanian schools and the proposal of some ways of prevention/ intervention in this problem. Also, to complete the picture of the specifics of the bullying phenomenon in Romanian schools, we used an interview guide, attended by 20 students, selected from the sample mentioned above. The results of our investigation confirmed the established hypotheses and facilitated the achievement of its aims.*

Keywords: *bullying; violence; victim; aggressor; prevention; intervention.*

1. Introduction. Literature Review

Many authors define the phenomenon of bullying as a threat to the peace, tranquility, health and general well-being of the members of a society (Lekunze and Strom, 2017: 147) of exercising their social roles (Limo, 2015) or as a systematic abuse of power (Smith and Sharp, 1994, apud Rigby, 2020: 1), respectively „any undesirable hostile behavior(s) directed by an individual or a group of people with more power, repeatedly and intentionally cause hurt or harm to another person who feel hard time to defending himself or herself” (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger and Lumpkin, 2014, in Krishnasamy, 2018: 30).

According to Fante (2005, apud Resendre Oliveira, Menezes, Irffi, Resendre Oliveira, 2018: 58), bullying is a situation characterized by repeated verbal or physical abuse by one or several students on one or more colleagues.

According to Olweus (1993, apud Aalsma, 2008: 101, van der Werf, 2014: 8; Downes and Cefai, 2016: 18) and Farrington, (1993, apud Gutierrez, Molina and Ñopo, 2018: 1), in order to define the phenomenon of bullying, we must consider three key elements: firstly, it consists in a form of verbal, physical or any kind of aggression, which produces fear, stress, injury to the victim; secondly, they are based on an

imbalance of forces between attackers and victims; thirdly, the phenomenon involves the repetition of the aggression on the same person, over a certain period of time.

Currently, the phenomenon of cyberbullying has become prevalent, involving new technologies, especially the Internet and any device through which children or adolescents may be subjected to aggression (Carr-Greg and Manocha, 2011; Smith, 2013).

Types of bullying

In table no. 1, we are presenting the main types of bullying, as well as the specific forms of manifestation.

Table 1: Types of bullying and forms of manifestation

No	Types of bullying	Forms of manifestation
1.	Physical Bullying	hitting, pushing, banging, coercing the other through physical contact, destroying the victim's personal belongings
2.	Verbal Bullying	threats, teasing, labeling, insults, blackmail, homophobic and racist remarks, verbal abuse
3.	Social Bullying (hidden)	spreading rumors and lies, jokes or ugly pranks, deliberate exclusion of someone
4.	Psychological Bullying	threat, manipulation, pursuit, ridicule
5.	Cyberbullying	use of technology to verbally, socially or psychologically intimidate

It is not considered bullying: arguments and mutual disagreements; singular episodes of social rejection or antipathy; singular episodes of rejection or contempt; random acts of aggression or intimidation.

Source: adapted from The National Centre Against Bullying, apud Carr-Greg and Manocha, 2011: 99

Some authors (Jan and Husain, 2015; White, 2019) differentiate another type of bullying, the sexual type, including gender discrimination, coercion, sexual abuse).

Najam and Kashif (2018) also mention the kind of bullying initiated by the teacher on the students, which refers to any form of communication coming from the teacher that the students feel as an aggression and which causes negative psychological reactions.

We should also mention that between the already presented types of bullying there are intersections, overlaps, some forms of manifestation that can be easily included in several types of bullying.

In a bullying case, there intervene several people, who have well-defined roles, which also involve a specific type of behavior (Krishnasamy, 2018) and who form what specialists call the bullying circle:

- the aggressor - the person who commits the aggression.
- the victim - the person who is intimidated, harassed by others.
- active or passive followers of the aggressor, who are part of his group of supporters.
- passive followers (not involved) or active (defenders) of the victim.

- involved observers, who do not belong to any of the groups.

J. White (2019: 10-12) presents a series of risk factors in the production of bullying situations: age, sex, relationships, socio-economic status and additional risk factors (disability, ethnic, linguistic or cultural differences, poverty, sexual orientation, physical appearance).

Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) also mention risk factors that target the class, such as: size, class size, group dynamics, the hierarchical structure of the class, normativity, rules, the characteristics of the teacher. We could add to these all the elements that make up the culture of a class (either visible or invisible), respectively the values promoted by the team members, traditions, habits, perceptions, the interrelational dimension (teacher-student, student-student relations) and, of course, as a sum of all these characteristics, the syntality of the class.

2. Symptoms

As it happened with the causes, the symptoms of bullying can also be grouped into several categories. They must be differentiated according to the victim or the aggressor, too. In agreement with Carr-Greg, Manocha, (2011: 100), we are presenting in table no. 3 a possible list of the most common symptoms.

Table 3: The symptoms of the people involved in a bullying situation

Types of Symptoms	Victim	Aggressor
Physical, physiological, somatic	Bruising, cuts, scratches, suspicious injuries, damaged or broken clothing or personal items, abdominal pain, headaches, bedwetting, decreased appetite	
Psychological, emotional	Anxiety, agitation, sadness, insomnia, nightmares, obvious mood swings	- permanent dissatisfaction, irritability, aggression, negative attitude towards school, lying, deception,
Behavioral, social	Refusing to go to school or discussing what is happening at school, changing the route to school, isolation, loneliness, asking for extra money.	-changing the group of friends, aggressive behavior, unexplained angry outbursts, refusal to complete schoolwork, desire to stand out, tendency to dominate, bringing home foreign objects that do not belong to him/ her

People subjected to aggression of any kind can develop diseases, which, depending on variable factors (the intensity of aggression, the duration of exposure of the victim to aggression, his/ her emotional structure, the family support, etc.) can take forms from mild to severe (Aulia, 2016). In most situations, people involved in bullying have low school performance (Alrokban, Alzaidi, Alqahtani, Almoayad and Fiala, 2019).

3. Ways of prevention/ intervention

First of all, regarding this phenomenon, it is necessary to insist on the prevention methods, to which all the factors involved must contribute, directly or indirectly in the school activity. As for the avoidance of this phenomenon, we can mention several types of actions, adapted from Seeley, Tombari, Bennett, Dunkle (2011: 6):

- Encouraging students' involvement in school or extracurricular activities
- Promoting a caring behavior model among students
- Initiating mentoring programs
- Providing opportunities for students to learn by engaging in various concrete activities
- Facilitating a smooth transition from one school year to another, from one stage to another
- Early initiation of certain prevention programs
- Adjusting the curricula to the needs and interests of the students

As ways of intervention, we can mention (Krishnasamy, 2018):

- at class level: frequent discussions related to acts of aggression, violence, intimidation; meetings with the parents.
- at individual level: having regular meetings with the people involved, focused on that particular matter; meetings with the parents of the children involved in bullying situations.

Although, most studies are aimed at the victims of the aggression and their counselling, we must not lose sight of the aggressors, who, due to some psychological, emotional, behavioural problems also require intervention (Richardson and Chii Fen, 2018). Moreover, in the process of preventing the occurrence of this phenomenon, the action on these people has a special importance.

4. The design of the research

The empirical research that we carried out aimed to know the opinion of the students - future teachers about the phenomenon of bullying in schools, in order to prevent/ intervene effectively in stopping it.

The pursued objectives were:

- Identifying the types of bullying, reported in schools, in Romania.
- Establishing an inventory of the causes of bullying in school.
- Identifying ways to prevent the occurrence of bullying in schools or some interventions meant to reduce the negative effects.

Closely related to the purpose and objectives mentioned above, we aimed to verify two hypotheses of the research:

1. Managing situations of aggression at class and school level represent an important skill in the profile of the future teachers.

2. Putting in actual situations of analysis and interpretation, respectively solving of bullying situations will ensure the formation of skills for the prevention/ resolution of bullying situations among students.

The sample of subjects consisted of 93 master-students from the University of Craiova, in their first year of master's studies, respectively in the first year of the psycho-pedagogical training program, designed to train future teachers to teach in non-compulsory education.

The research methods and tools used were the focus group interview and the analysis of the activity products of the students. The interview was attended by 20 students, randomly selected from different specializations. The interview guide consisted of 7 questions, which aimed to cover the issue of bullying in school, from forms of manifestation to the possibility of intervention.

For the analysis of the students' activity products, we used the results of the activity of all the students included in the sample. As types of learning products, we used the structured essay and problem solving.

In making the essay, the students had to analyze the issue of bullying in Romanian schools, having as benchmarks: identifying the already existing types of bullying; signaling possible causes of the event; presenting ways of prevention/ intervention.

For the evaluation of the essays, we used an evaluation grid structured on 3 dimensions (general aspect and content, writing), each with several subcriteria (see table 4).

Table 4: Evaluation grid for essays

No	Assessment criteria	Indicators	Scores (1-10)
1.	General aspect	Indication of the title on the cover	
		Follow the recommended structure	
		Compliance with the requirements (number of pages, format, etc.)	
2.	Content	Relevance of the issues addressed for the chosen topic	
		The logical chaining of ideas	
		Accordance between theme - title - content of the paper	
		Correct formulation of arguments and counter-arguments	
		Relevance of the provided examples or counterexamples	
		The accuracy of the terms, their correct use	
3.	Wording	Originality of ideas	
		Essay style, reflective, interrogative	
		Eloquence of speech	
			General score

Source: adapted from Mogonea, 2013: 190-191

Problem solving consisted in proposing intervention solutions, starting either from images or videos, which presented different situations of bullying. In order to assess how students analyzed the situations and provided solutions, we also used an assessment grid (see Table 5).

Table 5: Assessment grid for problem solving

No	Category	Criteria, indicators	Score (1-10)
1.	General aspects related to the requirements of the task	- Adequacy of the answers to the imposed requirements - Compliance with all the requirements - Solving all the proposed requirements	
2.	Aspects related to the scientific content	Critical analysis of the information presented Elaboration of solutions Critical analysis of the variants Arguing the efficiency of the chosen variant Correct identification of the roles of the participants - Adequacy of the scientific content of the answer to the theme and the problems expressed - Correct use of specialized terms, operational concepts - Capitalize and use examples correctly - Appropriate use of arguments/ counterarguments - Manifestation of originality in formulating the answer	
3.	Writing issues	- Correct, coherent, expressive expression	
			General score

Source: adapted from Mogonea, 2010b: 161

5. Results and discussions

We are presenting the results of our investigation, based on the two hypothetical statements we made.

Thus, we analyze the answers provided by the subjects to the focus-group interview, as well as some of the ideas expressed by the students in their essays, to establish the true value of the first hypothesis: *Managing situations of aggression in the classroom, in the school is an important competence in the profile of future teachers.*

Some of the questions posed in the interview also focused on the importance of training future teachers from the perspective of the possibility of managing conflict situations. Most of the participants reported an increase in the frequency of aggression situations among students at school. Teachers often face difficulties in carrying out

teaching activities due to tensions or even conflicts between students. Although many of them exist in latent form, there are, unfortunately, many obvious conflicts. However, in this situation, future teachers must be trained to deal with such situations.

Also, some of the ideas formulated in the essays written by the students emphasized the same aspect.

At the same time, the students had the opportunity to identify possible **causes** of bullying situations in schools. We are going to present below an inventory of them:

- family problems: disorganized families, with a low level of education and culture, domestic violence, deprivation of affection or emotional openness of the family to children.

- lack of empathy, tolerance towards others.

- taking over similar behavioral patterns, based on aggression, excess power.

- parenting styles, oriented either towards high demand or extreme tolerance.

- the aggressor, who is a victim of bullying in his own family, imitates the behavior of those who made him a victim of this phenomenon; abuse thus arises from the desire to impose oneself, to exercise control over the weak, putting them in an unfavorable light, as a method of regulating the negative self-image.

- the media can influence the behavior of the child/ adolescent, by exposing them to shows and programs with an aggressive and/ or violent character.

- the influence of the group of friends, the desire, the need to commit acts of aggression in order to be accepted by the group or in order to stand out.

- dysfunctions, emotional disorders.

Among the possible **consequences** arising from a bullying situation, the students mentioned:

- low self-esteem.

- sleep disorders, eating disorders.

- reduced school performance due to a decreased ability to concentrate.

- anxiety, followed by depression, thoughts and even suicide attempts.

- the risk of dropping out of school.

- the tendency to isolate the victim from the world around him/ her.

- weak empathy skills.

- the tendency of the victims to be manipulated in the future.

- exclusion from the group of the victim or the aggressor.

- the development of an antisocial behaviour that could affect the integration in society or lead to more serious acts.

The second hypothesis aimed not only to highlight the importance of the competence of future teachers to manage conflict situations in schools, but also to be able to practice the training of this competence. For this, we used the simulation of resolving procedures for different bullying situations previously presented, meant to validate the wording: *Putting in concrete situations of analysis and interpretation, respectively solving bullying situations will ensure the formation of the skills necessary to prevent/ resolve bullying situations among students.*

Problem solving is one of the most effective methods of skills training, by practicing learning based on discovery, investigation, exploration.

By presenting some images and videos, the students had the opportunity to analyze different situations of bullying, to propose different methods of prevention/ intervention.

We summarize from the answers provided by them:

- non-formal methods of anti-bullying education, such as role-playing games, through which children understand the position in which each part of the bullying action is exposed and become aware of the serious consequences that neglect can have.
- organizing seminars and free debates, meetings with psychologists or people who were part of the bullying phenomenon and who managed to overcome the situation, as an example of good practice.
- offering positive patterns of behaviour.
- the implementation of projects that develop the cohesion of the group, promote a positive educational environment based on empathy, cooperation, mutual support.
- encouraging, by the teacher, communication between students and the involvement of problematic students in teaching activities through which to create an environment favourable to socialization.
- good communication not only between students and teachers, but also between teachers and parents.
- setting up intervention groups that include representatives of the school, family, and community to combat bullying.
- organizing training seminars for teachers and other employees of the institution, on bullying.
- provision of methodological resources for the prevention of internet bullying.
- organizing excursions, camps in which students are taken out of their normal, ordinary environment, to build new rules of socialization.
- encouraging students to pursue their hobbies, to participate in as many cultural and sports activities as possible, where they will build social relationships with people who show the same interests as them, thus eliminating their frustrations, their tendencies towards aggression.
- recommendations made to students to participate in volunteer activities.
- use of role play.
- early identification of potentially violent students and the causes that can lead to their bullying tendencies, through the involvement of parents or specialized staff (school counsellors, psychologists, social workers, mediators);
- valorizing the interests, skills and capacity of students through various school and extracurricular activities to prevent problematic/ bullying events (sports, arts, etc.);
- encourage students to report any act of violence or suicide to a responsible adult.
- psychological counselling, training programs to ensure the well-being, facilitating school-family collaboration.
- organizing school contests/ competitions on bullying, in open spaces that can take various forms: from skits or small plays, painting and graphics exhibitions, posters (and/ or leaflets) created by them.
- once the aggressor is identified, his/ her behaviour must be shown as negative and punished, so that he/ she is rejected by the group and does not spread.
- guiding the aggressor to activities that would allow him to get rid of the tension or consume his energy (eg sports);
- discussions with a psychologist together with the family to understand the emotional state of the aggressor and the victim.

As there can be seen from the answers provided by the students, they mentioned both ways to prevent the phenomenon of bullying in schools and to intervene in such situations. Most of the recommendations target the victims of aggression, but there are also proposals that go to the category of aggressors, knowing that most of the time, it is more appropriate, more effective to act on the causes than on the effects.

Also, from the analysis of the examples provided by the students, we can notice that they look at the problem of preventing/ reducing or eliminating bullying situations in terms of possibilities, resources available to the teacher, but are aware that such a problem often finds itself solving through the synchronous, combined action of several factors that can provide support (family, school staff, psychologists, counselors, etc.).

Another aspect that we want to point out is related to the types of activities that students propose in order to prevent the phenomenon of bullying, both formal, organized by/ in schools, but also non-formal, carried out outside the school walls, starting from the premise that this kind of activities allow a different relationship between the students, much more natural, authentic.

At the same time, the investigated subjects proposed not only individual interventions on the students, but each of them being also, at the same time, a potential aggressor or victim. The improvement solutions they offered also aimed at stimulating the group interaction, the collaboration, its cohesion, which is especially important in the general context of preventing tension or conflict situations in the classroom.

Although, in case of certain aggressions, regardless of their type, the affective-emotional dimension is strongly involved and affected, we appreciate that students also sought to train or stimulate other dimensions of personality (cognitive, metacognitive) in describing ways of intervention.

6. Conclusions

The phenomenon of bullying is a harsh reality of any education system. Its causes are numerous and varied, from social to individual ones, related to the fundamental aspects of moral, axiological, cultural, economic, psychological type etc.

Also, the forms of manifestation of this phenomenon are diverse, with different intensity and consequences of different degrees, from mild to severe, primarily on the victims, but also on the aggressors.

Our research has shown that students who are training to become teachers are aware of the importance and scale of this phenomenon and have solutions, which can be useful in preventing its occurrence or, if it has already occurred, in prompt and effective intervention, so as to minimize the adverse consequences for those involved.

The intervention in such situations is a complex one, with the involvement of all qualified people and can only be firm, prompt, professional, personalized, oriented to the needs of those involved. Collaboration with the family is essential in this case, a fact reported by many students, both in their essays and in the ways proposed to solve some bullying situations. Obviously, the role of the school is to coordinate all these actions, meant to reduce, as much as possible, the frequency of this situation and to ensure the well-being of all its students.

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