

THE PHENOMENON OF BULLYING AT EARLY SCHOOL AGE: SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Cristina-Maria PESCARU¹, Maria PESCARU²

¹Senior Lecturer, PhD. University of Pitești (Romania), E-mail: chrystyna2010@yahoo.com

²Associate professor PhD. University of Pitești (Romania), E-mail: mariapescaru@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The phenomenon of bullying is a very little-known problem nowadays, also an uncomfortable subject. The consequences and causes of this phenomenon are manifested in every generation of children, noting a significant increase in psychological violence among students at small school age, being considered by the aggressors a normal, unintentional, repeatable situation that causes amusement and at the same time a feeling of well-being. The aggressor analyzes the class of students very well, choosing the weakest colleague or colleagues, who cannot defend themselves. They become vulnerable quite easily, thus labeling, bullying, mockery and even social exclusion, rejection follows. By conducting out a socio-pedagogical survey in rural schools using as a research tool the questionnaire applied to 105 little school children, coming from a precarious social environment, we wanted to identify if there is bullying that negatively influences mental development, social relations and students' behavior, their environment of origin being a factor that can favor the existence of this phenomenon.*

Keywords: bullying, young schoolchildren, aggressors, victims, social environment.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of bullying refers to several types of behavior that children can encounter at school, such as threatening, humiliating, destroying personal property, being excluded from a group, not being allowed to interact with other classmates or spreading derogatory words. It seems that physical appearance, shyness, the presence of certain disability or health problems, belonging to a precarious social environment, ethnicity, all these lead to the emergence of a new victim of this phenomenon. This is where the teaching staff must intervene, analyze the problem and try to talk personally with everyone, both the victim and the aggressor, find useful solutions.

Studies have shown that bullying does not have just one cause. Specialists say that the most important factors that contribute to the spread of this behavior are those of a personal, family, environmental, situational and social nature. Factors related to the family, school, social environment, or even one's own person can create the desire to attack those around them.

Bullying is defined as "the long-term physical and psychological terrorizing by an individual or group of a child who cannot defend himself in the situation" (Eftimie, 2014: 260).

In the National Education Law no. 1/2011, with subsequent amendments and additions, art. 66, at point 6, we find the following definition: "Psychological violence (bullying) is the action or series of physical, verbal, relational and/or cyber actions, in a social context that is difficult to avoid, carried out with intention, which involves an imbalance of power, have as a consequence the loss of dignity or the creation of an atmosphere of intimidation, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive, directed against a person or group of persons and aimed at aspects of discrimination and social exclusion, which may be related to belonging to a certain race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, social category or to a disadvantaged category or beliefs, gender or sexual orientation, personal characteristics, action or series of actions, behaviors carried out in educational units and in all spaces intended for education and professional training."

If we translate the English term “bullying” by “harassment”, the state of bullying characterizes the mental system of the bully’s personality, but also the mental system of the one prone to being bullied, the victim. Both the bully’s and the bullied’s personality are formed over time, based on a synthesis between individual favorable and psycho-social factors from the family microgroup or from the peer group (entourage).

The conceptual analysis shows the difficulty of defining the issue of aggression and especially the term bullying, the border between them is subtle and almost imperceptible. The operationalization of the concept of “bullying”, as a dimension of aggression, requires the analysis of the internal and external factors of the children’s personality, which is in a transformation in all its dimensions, affective, cognitive, social, attitudinal, of character.

A difficulty in defining the term “bullying” resides in the fact that most of the time, the term aggressiveness is used as a synonym for violence. “Specialists claim that, clinically, aggression is necessary for self-affirmation, while violence is the person’s response to a real or imagined danger in which the person is” (Ropotică, 2009: 422). Bullying produces emotional and behavioral problems that can continue to develop into adulthood.

2. Forms and causes of bullying aggression occurrence

Bullying is not a simple problem that occurs in the relationships between the bully and the bullied, but a complicated problem that must be solved by developing the social environment of the classroom, school, family as well as society. Children who bully other children are usually insecure, fearful, and have a history of internal trauma that is not being adequately managed in their families. Many authors represent the emotional environment at home as an important factor in becoming a bully or a victim. Thus, the lack of warmth between parents or between parents and children, the use of any type of violence and abuse in the family, combined with the lack of clear and reliable rules to guide the child, can catalyze the adoption of bullying behavior.

School is the place where children develop their own strengths, receive new knowledge, form their own personality, make children perceive reality and the world around us. School is an environment that educates every child with the desire to succeed, to overcome obstacles. And yet the bullying behavior persists and is very common in the school environment, the environment that society counts the most in the formation of a personality to which the future belongs.

Bullying is a form of aggression that is common among young schoolchildren, manifesting itself in aggressive behavior toward one or more students in the class, using insults, nicknames, lies, intimidation, threats someone or even it leads to acts of violence such as hitting, slapping, pushing, pulling hair, ears. Bullying is not a normal stage of children’s development and is considered a phenomenon that precedes aggressive behaviors with even more serious consequences (Nansel, et al. 2001: 2097). Simultaneously, bullying can contribute to the formation and maintenance of an environment of fear and intimidation in the school.

This growing phenomenon in the education system and beyond, must be treated seriously, detected, prevented and resolved in time. It is the duty of the adults to manage the situations and bring back a positive climate in the school environment and in the family. Teachers also play a major role in preventing, identifying and solving bullying behavior among students. The relationship between teachers and parents can prevent this scourge of international scope.

Bullies are formed over time - they are not born that way. Somewhere in life, children learn that in order to move up the social/hierarchical ladder, to gain benefits (attention, recognition, reputation, popularity, influence, power) they must fight, dominate, or assert themselves through defeat/submission to the others. Thus, in a concrete way, these children learn that to be successful, they must use their strength (both physical and intellectual/social skills) to win over others.

This type of dominant, competitive-aggressive behavior can be learned from parents, from peers in the group or entourage where they spend more time, from an older brother, sometimes from teachers, and last but not least, from the mass media. Thus, a child who is not properly guided ends up using these behaviors excessively, abusing them both at school and in everyday life in his quest to be successful. Furthermore, in this age of speed, children have become accustomed to immediate gratification and benefits with minimal effort. Often, these benefits are superficial and do not maintain the same level of satisfaction over time, making the person in question look for new benefits or new ways of obtaining them. It is, however, worth noting that, in children, these uncontrolled cycles lead to essential behavioral changes, especially lack of patience, lack of attention and lack of concentration, chronic dissatisfaction, boredom and the permanent search for factors to distract their attention or to stimulate them emotionally.

Passive victims of bullying aggression represent that category of students who are victimized by some peers and who do not show aggressive bullying behavior toward other students. Passive victims are at a higher risk of various mental health problems compared with those not involved in such behavior. Some studies suggest that victimization is positively correlated with problems such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000).

Bully-victims represent the category of students who are bullied by some colleagues, but who in turn exhibit bullying behavior toward other colleagues. Bully-victims show the poorest psychosocial functioning, representing a particularly high-risk group, characterized by higher rates of behavior problems, low self-control and social competence, poorer functioning in the school environment, compared to bullies and passive victims (Haynie et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2001). Also, this category of students presents mental health problems, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, eating disorders, depressive symptoms (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000; Haynie et al., 2001). Moreover, they are often involved in a deviant group and may be less able to form positive friendships with peers (Haynie et al., 2001).

An equally important but often overlooked category is that of *passive witnesses or observers*. "Some who hate conflict and embarrassment so much that they run away and turn away whenever they see something that makes them uncomfortable. There are those who consider themselves too weak and too insignificant to intervene. Some who, by intervening, disturb the situation even more" (Olweus, 1993: 39).

3. Consequences of the phenomenon of bullying

Many researchers have highlighted the short- and long-term negative impact of bullying that affects both victims and aggressors. Children who act as bullies are at greater risk of antisocial and delinquent behavior and involvement in criminal offending as adults (Olweus, 1991: 74) Depression is considered the most common mental health problem resulting from bullying (Kaltiala and Matti 1999: 665). Bullied children are disadvantaged, unhappy and suffer from problems related to self-esteem and self-confidence. They often feel anxious, feel shame and even feel guilty about what happened to them. In school, they are usually friendless, lonely and abandoned intruders (Olweus, 1993: 57). Their friendships are often affected due to increased fear of trusting their peers. The negative consequences affect not only their mental health but also their academic performance and can decrease their motivation to go to school and learn.

Consequences for victims

Some students respond to violence with violence. To defend themselves against the aggressor, they ask for help from friends, older brothers and sisters, very rarely - from parents and teachers. Children can also react to verbal abuse, by applying physical violence, a characteristic method especially for boys. Violence can stop when forces are comparable, if the

aggressor notices that he is unable to intimidate or demoralize the victim. In most cases, violence is directed at those who cannot adequately defend themselves.

Violence causes certain psychological harm to the victim, which manifests itself through a decrease in self-esteem, self-esteem, an increase in the level of anxiety, but also the development of depressive states. Most children completely lose their ability to defend themselves, believing that they are the only ones to blame for the fact that they are being bullied.

The child who was the victim of violence can isolate from other students, decrease in activism, fear, tendency to avoid communication with those around him. One of the worst effects of bullying is the high risk of suicidal behavior. With the passage of time, children who are bullied harshly and without support and help from the outside, lose hope in a positive solution and believe that suicide is the best option to eliminate their suffering. Physical problems include headaches, anxiety, sleep disorders, but a serious problem can be self-withdrawal from the educational process. Learning motivation, school success will decrease, which leads to the impossibility of completing the studies.

For most victims, the consequences can manifest themselves over the years in the form of stress disorders, anxiety, restlessness, social isolation and even antisocial behaviour.

Consequences for witnesses (observers, spectators)

Witnesses to violence can be teachers, students, auxiliary teaching staff, non-teaching staff of the educational institution and rarely parents. As witnesses of violence, adults, children and adolescents feel helpless, because of their inability to stop the violence, they consider themselves guilty and they fear that they can always end up in the place of the victim. Most of the witnesses do not inform teachers or parents about what happened because they doubt that measures will be taken, and their security will be guaranteed. For most children, reporting violence equates to weakness and inability to deal with problems. When violence is not stopped in time, witnesses associate themselves with the perpetrators, not the victims. Together, they find certain justifications to blame the victim, and frequent scenes of violence form tolerance for aggression and observers. These behaviors degrade the psycho-social climate in the classroom and school and negatively influence relationships between students or students and teachers. The atmosphere turns cold and the situation cannot be resolved unless the witnesses reveal the truth to stop the violence.

Consequences for the perpetrators of acts of violence (aggressors)

Often, the experience of bullies to dominate in school is the only possibility to achieve the desired status in the community. Thus, violence becomes the way to relate to those around even in adulthood. The aggressors' manifestations can also be accompanied by other behavioral problems, such as absenteeism from classes, smoking, alcohol abuse and various crimes. By far, not all children have such a combination of problems and not all become initiators of school violence.

Most of the perpetrators have a lower academic achievement and some may be expelled from the educational institution or taken into the records of the police station. In the case of serious crimes, which threaten the life and health of the victim, the aggressors are liable to administrative or criminal sanctions for the acts of bullying committed. Resorting to such punishments may make the child stop resorting to violence for a while, but it will not remove the cause of the aggressive behavior.

Consequences for the educational institution

Manifestations of violence in educational institutions reflect the problems that occur there. The unfavorable atmosphere in schools where cases of violence occur contribute to its spread and consolidation. Some pedagogues and managers of educational institutions do not deal with the conflict resolution, considering that these acts are normal for the formation of

resistance, the ability to defend the point of view, to defend oneself and to be prepared for the difficulties of life. When small acts of violence are tolerated, it is very easy to end with bullying, even if the administration of the educational institution has an authoritarian style. Such control keeps students in tension, but does not protect them from violence, but stimulates the formation of aggressive behavior.

In both cases, the administration of the educational institution and the teachers appoint the initiators of the violence responsible for maintaining the plain order, dealing with the amelioration of the cases that take place in the school so that the higher courts do not know the situation. Thus, children consider that they do not act and do not control themselves in these acts, taking personal measures themselves such as transferring to another educational institution, absenting themselves from classes or abandoning their studies. The inability of the schools to deal with the violence leads to conflicts with the parents, who will subsequently stop attending the meetings or move the children to another school.

4. The problem of research

Be it physical or verbal, bullying exerted on the child can have negative effects. Unfortunately, even in the 21st century, we can talk about quite serious forms of this type of violence to which children are subjected, avoiding asking for help for fear of repercussions. In Romania, few studies have investigated bullying in schools (Grădinaru, 2016: 225). According to the official data of the Children's Telephone Association, between October 2011 and October 2013, 2907 cases of bullying were registered in Romania, 45.72% of the cases involving physical violence, 22.86% verbal violence, 15.24% emotional abuse and 14.28% relational abuse.

Violence in Romanian schools has a high frequency. More than 75% of schools face this problem, 53% recognize these acts of bullying as a common practice, and 12% declare that they are happy to witness conflict situations (Grădinaru, 2016: 226).

5. The purpose of the research

The research aims to analyze the opinion of fourth-grade students regarding the phenomenon of bullying in school, to identify the negative educational influences that it constitutes on their development. The research questions was How does bullying affect children emotionally and socially? What do children think about the existence of this phenomenon at school? The objectives of the research are the following: to identify if whether are students in the 4th grade subjected to the phenomenon of bullying; to identify children's opinions about the phenomenon of bullying; to identify with the help of the questionnaire to what extent children subjected to psychological violence are affected.

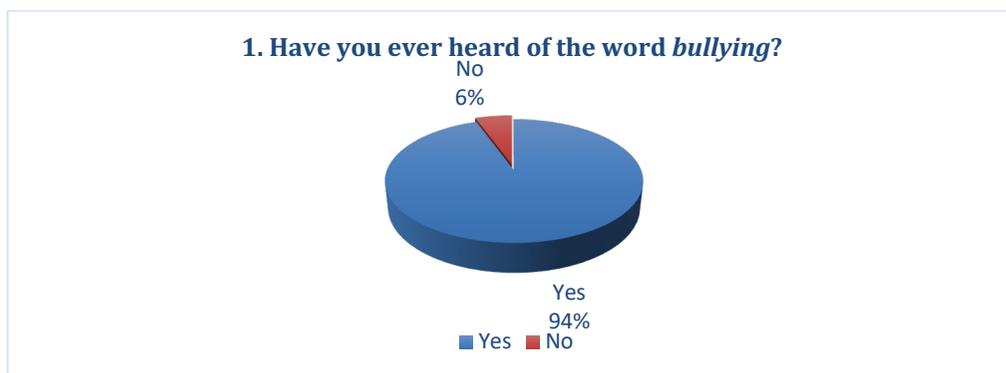
6. The working hypothesis

It is assumed that children are subjected to the phenomenon of bullying in rural schools, and these manifestations negatively influence their mental development, social relations and behavior. Students will give me the opportunity to observe how many of them are subject to bullying, what consequences bullying has on cognitive development, and how students manage this situation. In questionnaire number two, the teachers will answer the questions in the questionnaire and will reveal to me from their own experiences, focusing on bullying in schools and the negative educational consequences on the child.

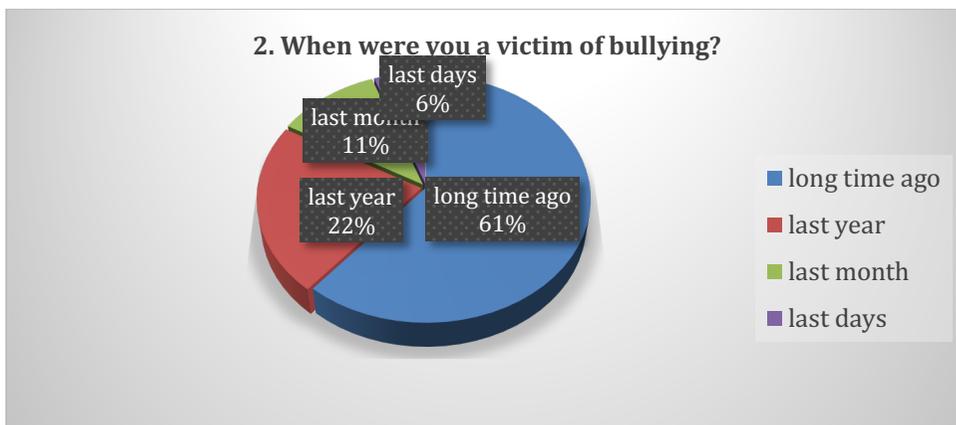
7. The sample of subjects is composed of 105 students, of which 64 are boys and 41 are girls and aged between 10 and 11 years from rural areas, with modest social status from Argeş County. To verify this hypothesis, we used the questionnaire-based survey as a research method.

8. Graphical Analysis and Interpretation

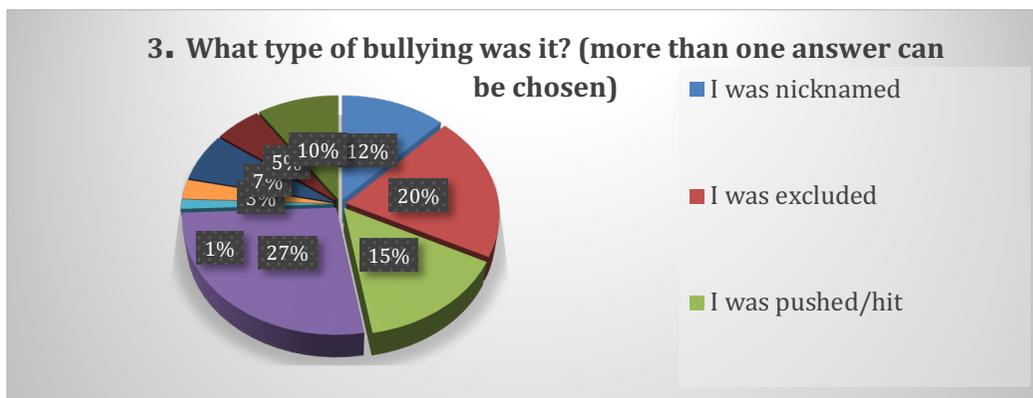
Analyzing the first question of the questionnaire, 89% of the students stated that they have met this term before, while only 11% have never heard of the word bullying.



To the question “When were you a victim of bullying?”, 60% answered that they were some time ago, 22% last year, 11% last month, while only 7% were the other day. Sooner or later, most students go through this form of emotional violence, with advanced or medium forms, but very late the connection is made with this phenomenon. We can see that bullying is increasing more and more, being very common in educational institutions with primary classes and up to high school.

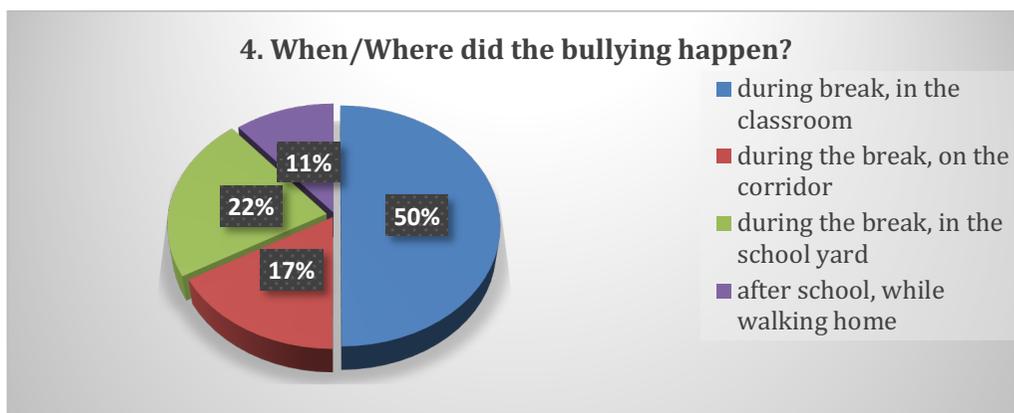


To the question “What type of bullying was it?”, 30% stated that they were offended, 22% that they were excluded, 16% that they were pushed or hit, 13% that they were called nicknames, and on the last places they found out the answers regarding the students who have other ethnicities, other religious beliefs, those who ask for money or other objects from the victims, who force them to do things for other colleagues, respectively those who laugh at the victims because of the way they look. As can be seen, at the top of the ranking are insults, hitting/pushing and exclusion, which are inseparable from a school collective and which still continue to spread rapidly in as many educational establishments as possible.

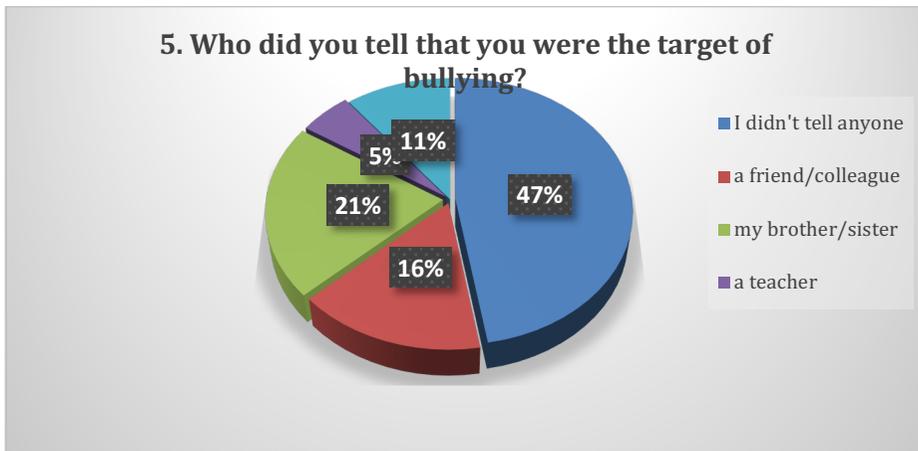


50% of the students surveyed stated that the bullying occurred during recess, in the classroom, while the other 50% were divided as follows: 22% of observers say that in the school yard, 17% during recess, in the corridor, and the remaining 11% after finishing classes, while they were on their way home. So half of the students have detected cases of bullying in the classroom, which can cause learning difficulties for both victims and observers.

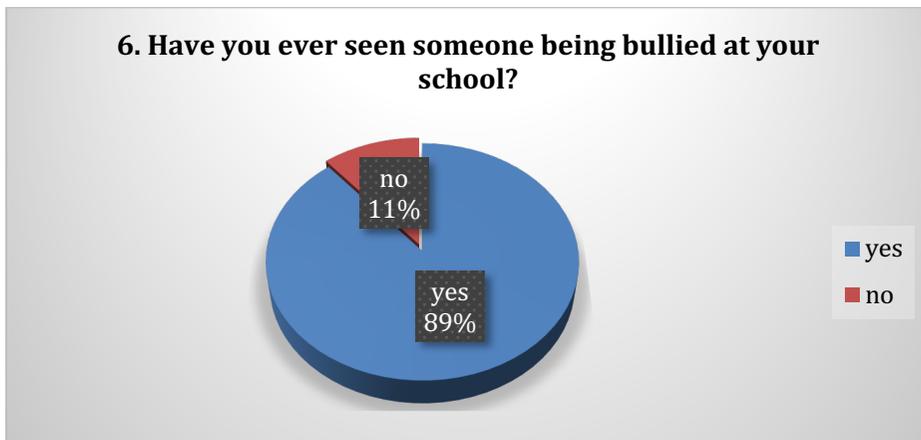
According to the answers received, this phenomenon is unconditionally present within the school and is in a continuous process of transmission.



As can be seen, more than half, 53% did not tell anyone if they were the target of bullying, 18% told a colleague/friend, 23% their brother/sister and only 6% had the courage to tell a teacher. Most of the victims of this phenomenon are afraid to tell someone close to their problem, considering that it is better to stay at this stage as long as necessary. But, on the other hand, the remaining 47% told their relatives, but as can be deduced from the answers, no initiative was taken to prevent and improve this situation.

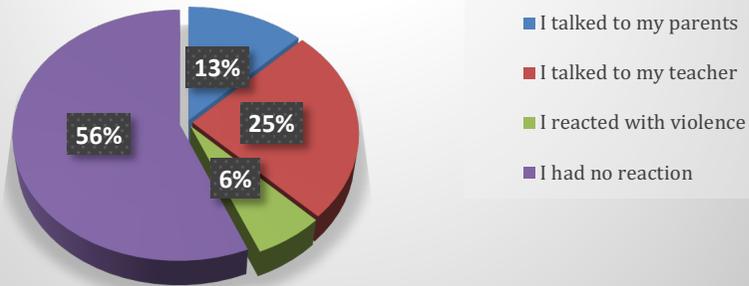


To the question “Have you ever seen someone being bullied at your school?”, 89% of the students surveyed answered yes, while only 11% answered no. So, in school there are cases of emotional violence, in several age categories, the phenomenon being noticed in all most classes. 11% can even be represented by the victims of bullying in the 4th grade who do not make contact with other schoolmates, probably also because of insults, hits, nicknames. Therefore, they do not notice that there are other people in the same situation, thus justifying their answer.



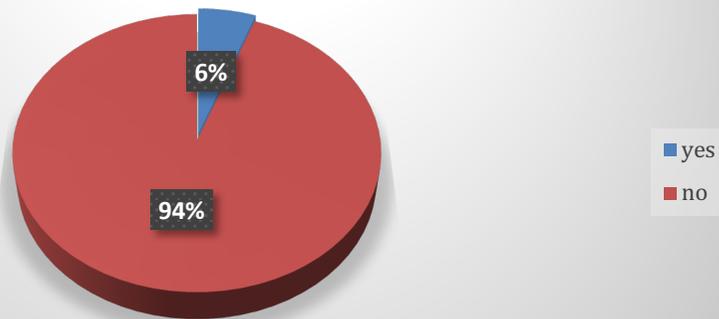
To the question “If you answered yes, how did you react?”, 56% had no reaction, 25% spoke to the teacher, 13% spoke to the parents, and the 6% reacted with violence. Analyzing the answers, more than half of those who said yes did not react to existing bullying situations in the school to avoid a conflict. They discussed the situation with the teacher or with their parents. We can see that they don't communicate either in class or at home. Parents often avoid listening to the child and actively participate in supporting him.

7. If you answered Yes, how did you react?

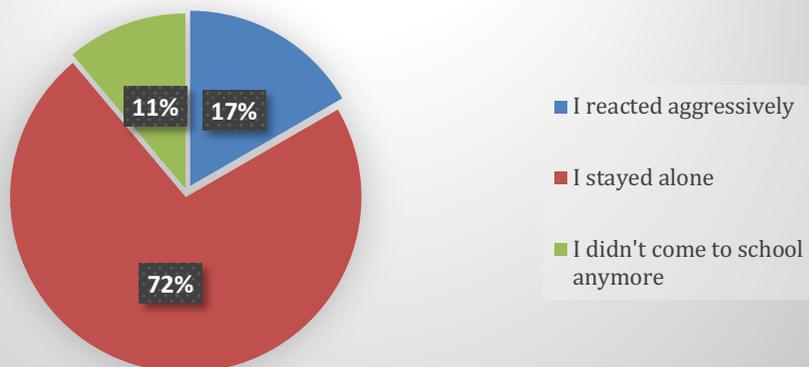


To the question “Were measures taken after they found the aggressor?” only 2 answer options were used: 94% answered No, and 6% yes. Students who responded negatively stated that no action was taken regarding existing bullying cases in schools, or that the situation was better for a short time, and then it started again.

8. Were measures taken after they found the aggressor?

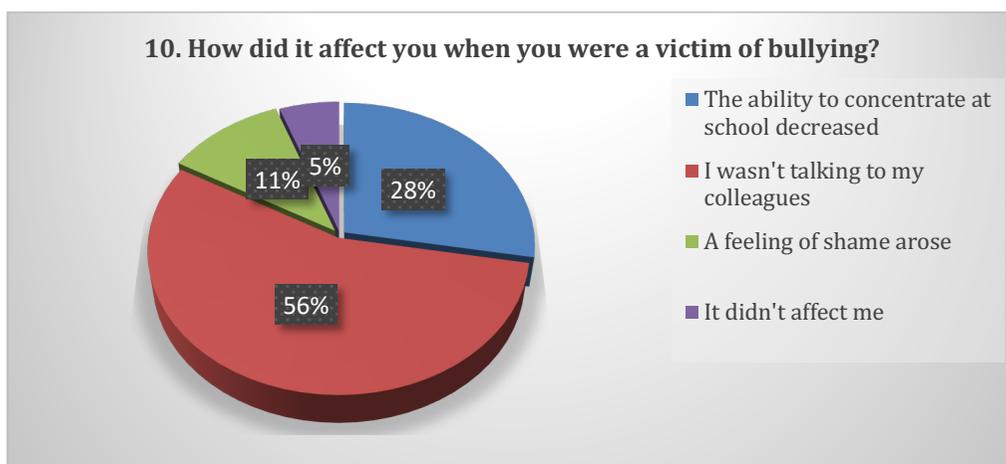


9. What did you do when you were a victim of bullying?



According to the above question, the following answer options were identified: Only 17% of the students reacted aggressively when they were victims of bullying because it can easily cause a conflict from which it will be quite difficult to get out. In a percentage of 72%, the students stated that during the period when they were the victims of this phenomenon, they were isolated from the rest of the group because the insults, hits and other humiliations did not stop. 11% of students stopped attending classes, which may indicate that bullying has reached a fairly advanced form. Those children were very affected by the aggressors' behavior toward them, choosing to be absent from classes just to avoid direct contact with them.

To the question “How did it affect you when you were a victim of bullying?” more than half, i.e. 56%, answered that they did not talk to their colleagues, here referring to shyness, isolation, followed by 28%, a percentage represented by students whose ability to concentrate during classes decreased, 11% the students who acquired a sense of shame and only 5% the student who was not affected by bullying. As shown in the diagram, the consequences are multiple. From shyness, shame, isolation can lead to unmotivated absence from classes.



This last question “Are you still a victim of bullying?” is represented by a negative response of 94%, which indicates that the degree of bullying is quite low, but it exists, while the positivity is 6%.



9. Conclusions

We found that students face the phenomenon of bullying at school, we discovered the children's opinions about bullying and last but not least, we identified to what extent children subjected to this phenomenon are affected in school success.

The socio-pedagogical research carried out with the aim of analyzing the negative-educational influences that bullying constitutes on a child's development, confirms our working hypothesis regarding the devastating effects that this phenomenon has, being declared a major problem in schools.

Bullying is a risk factor for school dropout and juvenile delinquency. Students who bully are 5-6 times more likely to engage in antisocial behavior as adults (Olweus, 1991: 87). Most often, a child who has been severely bullied ends up dropping out of school for fear of being bullied again. Even in the case of the mildest forms, repeated exposure to a bullying experience predisposes children to the development of numerous mental health problems: depression, anxiety, eating disorders, etc. (Limber, 2002: 16).

Bullying is not a phenomenon that appeared yesterday or today, but it has always existed. As long as there is someone with a weaker personality, that someone will be the subject of jokes and teasing from colleagues.

Today we observe numerous changes, in terms of the evolution of the family unit, both in terms of the value, attitudinal and behavioral models adopted, as well as in terms of organization, functioning and relations between members. The multiple parenting models proposed to parents contribute to the changes that we, specialists in the field or not, notice. The school is in the process of rebuilding its foundations.

Additionally, the child is not only subject to family influences, but to a wider set, which includes the socio-cultural environment. As many psychologists argue, the family and school must persevere in developing children's sense of belonging to the family, school and community.

Secondary socialization is related to the social division of labor and the social distribution of acquired knowledge. It involves internalizing the requirements, information and values promoted by different institutions with which the young person comes into contact step by step. The socialization process of the young person is sometimes difficult, even if the parents get involved properly and support his education, because the proximity factors that influence the shaping of the self can play a negative role. If parents are not properly involved in their children's education, the situation becomes even more complicated.

The school environment must be aware that: insulting, teasing, hitting, stressing, spreading gossip, threatening, isolating, mocking, imitating must stop because they represent unhealthy attitudes and behavior that harm the development of any child. The cultivation of prosocial values must be a constant in the education of students.

At the school level, bullying can be prevented through education, more precisely, through the development of disciplinary policies and through the promotion of prosocial values. The school environment must deal more carefully with the danger of bullying.

References:

1. Eftimie S., (2014). *Agresivitatea în adolescență*, Iași: European Institute Publishing House
2. Ropotică I.M. (2009). *Violența în școală*, Bucharest: Renaissance Publishing House
3. Gradinaru, I.A., (2016). Violență, hrănire și metode de supraviețuire. *Meta Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*. 8(1): 219-232
4. Haynie, D., Nanel, T. and Eitel, P. (2001). Bullies, Victims, and bully/vistims; distinct group of a risk youth. *Journal of Early Adolescence*. 21: 29-49.
5. Kaltiala-Heino and Rimpela, M. (2000). Bullying at school—an indicator of adolescents at risk for mental disorders. *Journal of Adolescence*. 23: 661–674 [online] available at: <http://www.idealibrary.com>

6. Limber, S.P. (2002). Addressing Youth Bullying Behaviour. in: M. Fleming, K. Towey K. (eds.). *Educational Forum on Adolescent Health: Youth Bullying*, pp.4-18. [online] available at: <http://www.ama-assm.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/39/youthbullying.pdf>.
7. Nansel, Tonja R., Mary Overpeck, Romani S. Pilla, June Ruan, Bruce Simons-Morton and Peter Scheidt. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US Youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of American Medical Association*. 285(16), 2094–2100. [online] available at: <http://jama.amaassn.org/cgi/content/full/285/16/2094>
8. Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. New-York: Wiley-Blackwell
9. Olweus, D. (1991). Bully/victim problems among school children: Basic facts and effects of a school-based intervention program. In D. Pepler and K.H. Rubin (coord.), *The Development and Treatment of Childhood Aggression*. New.York.: Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale
10. *** *National Education Law no. 1/2011*