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Bullying in the School Environment. An Aggressor in a School Classroom Seen through His/Her Homeroom Teacher's Eyes

Abstract

This contribution of a theoretical-investigative character deals with bullying in the school environment, understood by us as a pedagogic, psychological, and legal phenomenon. At the same time it is a problem which is presently necessary for society to be specifically determined, defined, urgently solved, and it becomes a subject of increased interest of both the professional and lay public due to its seriousness. In our research we focused on how an aggressor and his/her specific manifestations are perceived by his/her homeroom teacher. We have found out that homeroom teachers perceive manifestations of aggressive behaviour differently; they consider them to be risky and rank them into multiple categories of a pupil's risky behaviour. And on the contrary, there are teachers that do not consider an aggressor's behaviour to be risky according to any of the categories of a pupil's risky behaviour. We have noted more significant differences in homeroom teachers' perception of a boy or a girl as an aggressor.

Key words: *Bullying in school environment, aggressor, homeroom teacher*

Introduction

Bullying in the school environment is a pedagogic, psychological, and legal phenomenon. At the same time we consider it to be a problem. At the same time it is a problem which is presently necessary for society to be specifically determined, defined, and urgently solved. The notion "bullying" in the school environment can

be analyzed from the psychological point of view as specific behavioural alienation (M. Vágnerová, 2004, p. 779); from the pedagogic point of view as a problematic behaviour (problematic behaviour in the context of education, J. Grác, 1991, p. 168; in L. Ďurič, J. Grác, J. Štefanovič 1991); and from the legal point of view as well as from the criminal law point of view as violent criminal activity (violent delinquency) committed by a child or by a juvenile, while in case of the juvenile bullying we may speak about youth delinquency (L. Sejčová, 2001, p. 22; O. Matoušek, A. Kroftová, 2003, p. 315). A specific feature of school bullying is that the mentioned views of its understanding are mutually intertwined and complementary, since the matter is complex and school bullying cannot be read as a problematic behaviour out of its psychological context as a defective behaviour, nor leave out its legal basis and legal consequences for our society.

Theoretical basis

Bullying as a form of an aggressive behaviour among young people becomes a subject of increased interest of both the professional and lay public due to its seriousness. In this context P. Pöthe (1996, p. 76) emphasizes that both the professional and lay public need theoretical guidance and practical experience to solve this highly dangerous phenomenon to be found mainly among children. According to the author, among school teachers, parents, and the general public a dangerous opinion can be found that considers bullying among children to be a natural and common phenomenon, assuming “they will solve it among themselves”, and that there is always someone who disposes of a non-repulsive character or attribute, little self-assertive or unable to meet the attacks, and all that authorizes others to maltreat them. By this they convey their own responsibility as well as the responsibility of the child committing bullying on the victim. In some cases we even see that a bullying pupil is popular and attractive for his/her teacher or teachers, which makes it more difficult or impossible to disclose his/her negative behaviour in school collective.

According to D. Olweus (1994) school bullying is a repeated aggressive behaviour directed from one child to the other, while a strong imbalance of powers occurs. D. Olweus (1992) considers bullying to be a negative act of intentional intrusion or an attempt of intentional intrusion which later becomes aggression. Its aim is to hurt or create discomfort while having a negative impact on persons involved. In the English professional and popular literature in the context of *bullying* we encounter the notion “*victimization*” (E.V.E. Hodges a D.G. Perry, 1999; R.A. Finnegan et al., 1998; S.K. Egan and D.G. Perry, 1998; N.R. Crick, and M.A. Bigbee, 1998 as

well as others), bullying or harming of a specific victim (a victim in the school environment). In their investigations, N.R. Crick and M.A. Bigbee (1998, pp. 337–347) especially focused on **boys' and girls' forms** of bullying while emphasizing the previous tendency to examine only boys and their specific forms of tyrannizing. However, boys' and girls' forms of tyrannizing differ largely. Boys tend to use the so-called open form of bullying and “overt aggression” in the form of physical attacks, which is less common for girls. In girls' collective the so-called “relational form of victimization” prevails, which takes on the form of gossip, machinations, and exclusion from a collective. Both forms destine pupils to specific problems when accommodating to the school environment.

Bullying has scores of reasons and to look on them requires links to the persons involved. As a *person involved in bullying* we consider a pupil taking any part in bullying, it means he/shi is its aggressor, victim, or a witness to it. Under the term *bullying initiator* we understand a pupil who initiates bullying, in this case it may involve the aggressor himself, his/her victim, or the witness. Most frequently in the literature we encounter Olweus' (1994) and Kolář's (2001) notions “aggressor” (offender, pupil that in fact commits bullying) and “victim” (pupil under bullying).

In the context of **imperfections in environment** as the reason for bullying school climate is mentioned most frequently or the climate of the school classroom, which always influences directly the origination and progression of behavioural problems occurring in a school classroom. Positive climate helps create a suitable working environment, unlike a negative one that increases the possibility for behaviour problems to occur. According to M. Vágnerová (2005) bullying is a demonstration of **significantly and permanently disorganized attitudes in a school classroom**. M. Kolář (2001, p. 92–94) speaks about a **traditional pedagogic style** to cope with bullying situations. A pedagogue is to master a class with an unknown constellation – formula, in which bullying grows, trying to put through his/her influence from a position of a superior authority. Such a hierarchical-authoritative style does not make use of the potential of mutual attitudes and interactions among pupils naturally leaving to act the force of group dynamics. In a lonely battle for his/her authority and influence it happens that a pedagogue, especially in times of certain weakening, favours either “strong” pupils or simply the majority of the class. He/she pursues, often unintentionally, to “get along with them” in order to keep his/her position of authority and power necessary for quality teaching, however, often at the expense of those “weak” overlooked pupils. A teacher can therefore on these bases present his/her favour to the aggressor, thus supporting his/her negative behaviour. A pedagogue relying on his/her own strength only has fear of the conflict with the aggressor in front of the class, while thinking there would be nobody in class to support him/her, which would result in a total loss of his/her authority. In case that

there are a few very problematic and aggressive individuals in class, conflicts are inevitable and there happens a break down of his/her outward authority. Since the teacher does not share such a situation either with his/her senior executive or with his/her colleagues, aggression escalates. Bullying reaches the highest level of destruction. The traditional hierarchical-authoritative style of pedagogic work is a result of traditional teacher training. In most cases graduates are not ready for democratic forms of work or for the construction of pedagogic communities. This very fact, together with the absence of the theory and methodology of coping with bullying in the school environment, the author considers as the most serious deficiency that causes ineffectiveness to combat bullying at schools. Bullying is also helped by prevailing frontal teaching. Bullying at school is supported by teachers with a strong need for power, with a need to enter the position of an important authority taking control, ordering, manipulating, and punishing, with a need to feel superior, with little self-esteem up to the feeling of inferiority. The motivation of these teachers' behaviour in this case is identical with the motivation of the initiators of bullying. Bullying at school is also supported by immature teachers, close-set ones with their needs, problems, unable to create an atmosphere of affection, empathy, compassion, and understanding. These teachers overlook suspicious conditions in pupils' behaviour paradoxically appreciating the aggression of strong pupils against outsiders. A pedagogue may prevent advanced bullying inquisition by his/her being not ready for the situation or by his/her being involved in the "game". It happens, in case that the aggressor is a "handy" pupil, a favourite, a class star, that the teacher feels all that to be some misunderstanding, and he/she wants to defend the aggressor (M. Kolář, 2000). In order that the teacher keeps the class functional, it is useful for him/her to join the majority of pupils governing the class; he/she is helpful making arrangements with them. Sometimes he/she initiates bullying himself/herself by a statement on a pupil that spoils school evidences while others should prevent it. The first reaction of a teacher encountering class violence is shock; in some cases powerlessness, panic, surprise; it sometimes happens that a teacher leaves the class, or he/she simulates he/she does not see the violence, or he/she sinks in helplessness not knowing what to do. A frequent reaction is passing the guilt on the victim saying: "You were provoking again!" A teacher with knowledge on the mechanism of bullying will be more sensitive to the manifestations signifying something wrong in his/her class while trying to clarify the situation. From the prevention point of view it is very desirable that the teacher pays attention to the indirect warning signals and purposefully, systematically locating them by means of **screening questionnaires**. As to the author, current practice mirrors teachers beginning to solve bullying only when direct warning signals are evident, only when the so-called bullying explosion appears, or when parents ask the school to investigate bullying of their child.

A school psychologist takes an indispensable place in solving this problem as well. According to the findings of M. Valihorová (2006, p. 102), while preventing and taking concrete steps to solve risky behaviour, especially violence at school, teachers themselves consider the help and cooperation of a school psychologist inevitable.

While doing research into bullying, it is emphasized to investigate in the area of the personality of the persons involved in bullying as the reason for its appearance; there appears the need to separately examine the categories of bullying and of the victims. At the same time, a change of the research focus is necessary; from the investigation of dyadic relations to bullying as a whole-group process that represents an outfall of corrupted relations in a school classroom.

It was the aim of our research to find out how an aggressor is perceived by his/her homeroom teacher. We were interested in how the homeroom teacher perceives specific manifestations of an aggressor's behaviour, if and to what extent he/she considers them to be important and to which categories of risky behaviour he/she places them. In spite of the mentioned teacher's fear of losing authority we assumed homeroom teachers to perceive an aggressor's behaviour that is systematically bullying his/her classmates as anti-social and this pupil will not be popular among his/her teachers.

The **research sample** of our investigation was made up by pupils of two secondary schools of professional type SOU in Banská Bystrica and SOU in Trnava. Primary investigations included all pupils from six school classes in which bullying problems occurred, and later the main research sample was made up by 20 pupils, 17 boys and 3 girls, who were identified by their classmates as most aggressive and most pushing ahead themselves in social relations among schoolmates in their school classroom.

Table 1: The allocation of pupils in a group of aggressors and pupils that have not got any vote for aggressor in school classroom

Class	SOU e. BB				SOU e. TT		Total	
	A 2 nd grade	B 1 st grade	C 4 th grade	D 3 rd grade	E 3 rd grade	F 3 rd grade	number	%
Pupils – aggressors	1	3	3	3	6	4	20	13.4
Pupils – “non-aggressors”	13	16	13	13	14	4	73	49
Remaining pupils	4	5	12	14	11	10	56	37.6
All pupils	18	24	28	30	31	18	149	100

Table 2: The allocation of boys and girls in a group of aggressors as well as of bullying victims

Class	SOU e. BB				SOU e. TT		Total	
	A 2 nd grade	B 1 st grade	C 4 th grade	D 3 rd grade	E 3 rd grade	F 3 rd grade	number	%
Aggressors – boys	1	3	3	3	3	4	20	13.4
Aggressors – girls	0	0	0	0	3	0		
Victims – boys	0	2	3	2	2	3	14	9.4
Victims – girls	1	0	0	0	1	0		
All pupils	18	24	28	30	31	18	149	100

Research methods

1. For the purpose of bullying pupils identification, aggressors in school classes, we decided to use a screening questionnaire of our own construction based on similar screening questionnaires by M. Kolář (2001, pp. 221–225), by which we have identified the names of aggressors and victims in six school classes.
2. For the purpose of the identification of the subjective homeroom teacher's reception of the aggressors we used the **Scale of a pupil's risky behaviour for teachers** by A. Mezera, L. Škeřík and J. Kubiče (2000). The scale belongs to the battery of the scaled standardized questionnaires, it uses the method of summed assumptions and it is focused on the diagnosis of the occurrence and intensity of many atypical manifestations in the area of risky social and school behaviour that predisposes juveniles to the defects at the level of drug and non-drug addiction and dissociality. The scale diagnoses the following categories of risky behaviour: asocial behaviour, **antisocial behaviour**, **ego-centric behaviour**, **impulsive behaviour**, **maladaptive behaviour**, **negativistic behaviour**, **inclination to a problematic group**.

The overall profile of a juvenile in the area of his/her social behaviour manifestation enables us to obtain an adequate picture of his/her usual behaviour in comparison with his/her peers and when used periodically it gives a view of his/her behaviour changes with the identification of inevitable preventive care.

Research results and their interpretation

In order to find out how the manifestations of aggressors' behaviour in a school classroom is perceived by their homeroom teachers and what attitude they take to these pupils, the mentioned scale was administered to the teachers of the researched classes. The results can be found in the following tables.

Table 3: Data evaluation of the Scale of risky behaviour of a pupil – boys

Boys aggressors	Asocial behaviour	Antisocial behaviour	Egocentric behaviour	Impulsive behaviour	Maladaptive behaviour	Negative behaviour	Inclination to problematic group
A1	7	8	13	7	14	10	4
A2	26	30*	29*	23	40	17	15
A3	27	30*	26	31*	50*	21*	18*
A4	16	9	18	10	21	5	7
A5	12	12	13	12	28	10	11
A6	23	11	23	14	32	17	15
A7	24	12	24	15	35	17	16
A8	22	26	27	17	29	15	17
A9	31*	47*	40*	25	57*	24*	15
A10	17	10	11	7	18	5	18*
A11	32*	31	38*	26	48	18	14
A12	37*	34	35*	25	51*	26*	13
A13	26	35	27	27*	48	16	15
A14	29*	38*	32*	21	54*	19	17
A15	30*	35	30*	30*	54*	18	20*
A16	19	29	18	14	37	11	18*
A17	18	22	16	14	34	10	12
Average	23.29	24.65	24.71	18.71	38.24	15.24	14.41
SD	7.76	12.11	8.87	7.83	13.46	6.00	4.11
Median	24	29	26	17	37	17	15
Norm	6.5–34	9–41	7–33	13–29	26–55	6–22	8–19
Med nor	21	24	20	22	40	14	14

* – increased score, * – A class; * – B class; * – C class; * – D class; * – E class; * – F class

Table 4: Testing the categories of risky behaviour of aggressors – boys

SRG	Asocial behaviour	Antisocial behaviour	Egocentric behaviour	Impulsive behaviour	Maladaptive behaviour	Negativist behaviour	Inclination to a problematic group
t-test	1.219	0.220	2.187	-1.734	-0.541	0.850	0.413
p	0.241	0.828	0.044*	0.102	0.596	0.408	0.685

* - statistically significant at the significance level $p < 0.05$

Based on the statistic processing of the data obtained by the Scale of pupils' risky behaviour, where homeroom teachers evaluated the behaviour of the identified aggressors – boys, we may state that the aggressors' behaviour is **not** placed by their homeroom teachers in frame of the increased score in the categories of risky behaviour: asocial behaviour, antisocial behaviour, impulsive behaviour, maladaptive behaviour, negativistic behaviour, inclination to a problematic group. Aggressors' behaviour is placed by their homeroom teachers in frame of the increased score in one category of risky behaviour – **Egocentric behaviour**.

In principle we may divide homeroom teaches making evaluation of the risky behaviour of the identified aggressors – boys in their class into two groups:

1. Homeroom teachers looking at the aggressor's behaviour (A2, A3, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13, A14, A15, A16) as being risky, deviant from the norm, being aware of the seriousness of this behaviour. The most frequently considered category of aggressors' risky behaviour was **Egocentric behaviour**, then Asocial and Maladaptive behaviour.

2. Homeroom teachers looking at the behaviour of this pupil (A1, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A17) as normal, not deviant from the norm; in this case there also appeared an evaluation within the decreased score, as a behaviour positively evaluated as being **non-risky in any of the categories**. We may state that the homeroom teachers in classes A and C looked at their pupils, those identified aggressors, positively.

Based on the results acquired through the Scale of a pupil's risky behaviour, where the homeroom teacher evaluated the behaviour of the identified "female aggressors" – girls, we may state that the behaviour of these girls is looked at by their homeroom teacher as risky (deviant from the norm), in the frame of an increased score in various categories of risky behaviour. Because of the small number of girls (3) it was not possible to statistically process the obtained data. The most frequently assessed category of risky behaviour among "female aggressors" was **Impulsive behaviour**, then Asocial, Egocentric and Maladaptive behaviour. The behaviour of the "female aggressors" is not evaluated by their homeroom

Table 5: Data evaluation of the Scale of risky behaviour of a pupil – girls

Girls aggressors	Asocial behaviour	Antisocial behaviour	Egocentric behaviour	Impulsive behaviour	Maladaptive behaviour	Negative behaviour	Inclination to a problematic group
A18	29*	26	32*	26*	43	15	10
A19	20	20	15	27*	55*	14	19
A20	29*	30*	31*	26*	58*	24*	12
Average	26	25.33	26	26.33	52	17.67	13.67
SD	5.20	5.03	9.54	0.58	7.94	5.51	4.73
Median	29	26	31	26	55	15	12
Norm	15–30	14–31	10–26	15–29	34–57	10–20	12–22
Median of the norm	22	22	18	22	46	15	17

* = increased score, * – E class

Table 6: Statistically significant correlations of categories of risky behaviour among aggressors (n = 20)

R	Asoc. behaviour	Antisoc. behaviour	Egocentr. behaviour	Impuls. behaviour	Maladapt. behaviour	Negativist. behaviour	Inclin. to a problematic group
Asocial behaviour		0.83**	0.94**	0.73**	0.79**	0.90**	
P		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Antisocial behaviour			0.82**	0.70**	0.80**	0.77**	
P			0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Egocentric behaviour				0.60**	0.69**	0.83**	
P				0.00	0.00	0.00	
Impulsive behaviour					0.82**	0.66**	
P					0.00	0.00	
Maladaptive behaviour						0.79**	
P						0.00	

** – Spearmanov correlative coefficient is significant at significance level $p < 0,01$

teachers in the frame of the increased score in the category of risky behaviour **Inclination to a problematic group**.

We were interested in which categories of the Scale of a pupil's risky behaviour mutual correlations among aggressors will show.

Statistically significant positive correlations of the categories of the aggressors' risky behaviour were recorded among all the categories of risky behaviour except the category **Inclination to a problematic group**. Homeroom teachers assessed as significant behaviour of aggressors – boys and girls - in all of the mentioned categories; it means that they consider bullying to be expressions of asocial, antisocial, egocentric, impulsive, maladaptive as well as negativistic behaviour, but not because of the manifestations of the pupil's inclination to a problematic group. An aggressor's behaviour (and thus expressions of bullying as well) can be perceived by his/her homeroom teacher as an individual act rather than an act of a group.

Conclusion

By means of our research we have found out that the homeroom teachers perceive specific demonstrations of an aggressor's behaviour differently. The behaviour of aggressors – boys is not evaluated by their homeroom teachers in frame of the increased score in most of the categories of a pupil's risky behaviour. On the contrary, the behaviour of aggressive girls is evaluated by their homeroom teachers as risky (deviant from the norm), in the frame of increased score in various categories of a risky behaviour. The most frequently evaluated category of a risky behaviour of girls is Impulsive behaviour, Asocial, Egocentric and Maladaptive behaviour. The behaviour of "female aggressors" is not evaluated by their homeroom teacher in the frame of increased score in the category of a risky behaviour "Inclination to a problematic group".

We have also found out that the demonstrations of bullying in the school environment are perceived by homeroom teachers as an individual act rather than an act of a group. This fact is also linked to defective understanding of bullying as a problem of an aggressor and his/her victim and not as a problem of the whole group that is coming out of significantly and permanently corrupted attitudes in a school class.

We may state that the homeroom teachers in the classes A and C, who did not evaluate the behaviour of identified aggressors (boys) as risky, most probably did so pursuing to put themselves as well as their class in positive light, out of ignorance about aggressive expressions of these pupils, or out of unconscious tendency to "get along" with aggressors. By this way they do them a favour in order to get their

position of authority and power in class. In this case we may speak about detraction or ignorance about a bullying situation in a school class.

It is possible that an aggressor's behaviour differently perceived from the gender point of view can be also caused by usual gender stereotypes in which aggressive demonstrations of boys are often considered "natural and normal".

The featured findings again point to the fact that teacher training is not systematically focused on the prevention, identification as well as on the solution of this phenomenon. There is also a lack of preparation in the area of gender differences, gender problems, and the like.

On 28th March 2006 the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic (2006) worked out **methodological directions toward the prevention and solution of bullying of pupils at schools and school institutions**, which came into effect on 1st April 2006. The basic preventive arrangement of a school is to accept the basic principle "We are a school with no tolerance of bullying in any form!" The directions also deal with (besides the methods of bullying solution and arrangements to solve bullying situations) preventive arrangement connected mainly with the activities of schools and school institutions, school inspectors, parents, State pedagogic department, methodological-pedagogical centres as well as of other subjects. We therefore can consider it to be a current basic document as well as a model of the effective prevention of bullying in the school environment.

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