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Pupils' Aggressive Behaviour towards Teachers in Elementary Schools in Slovakia

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Abstract

Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers is a serious educational problem prompting social need for its solution in the school environment. The present research study aims to monitor the current state of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers. The study is of a theoretical-empirical nature. At the theoretical level, the issue is relatively little treated in the Slovak professional literature. It is paid more attention by foreign authors. The empirical section of the study presents results of our research conducted in Slovakia in 2016 among teachers of the elementary school second level in the Banská Bystrica and Žilina regions, as well as among professional staff at centres for pedagogical counselling and prevention. The research paid special attention to forms of aggressive behaviour, gender differences and causes of these serious behavioural disorders in pupils. Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers may have a variety of forms of which the verbal form such as back-talking and vulgarisms towards teachers is the most frequent. Gender differences recorded in pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers showed the prevalence of boys. From the aspect of causes of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers, those were mainly improper parenting and a lack of teacher authority.

Keywords: *aggressive behaviour, pupils, elementary schools, teacher authority, aggression, prevention*

Introduction

The origin of the term “aggression” is the Latin word “aggredi” meaning to attack. According to L. Lachytová the term “aggression” most frequently denotes aggressive behaviour usually arising in response on an actual or only illusory threat to one’s power, most frequently as a manifestation of anger (2011, p. 55). Z. Martínek (2015, p. 38) describes aggressive behaviour as behaviour that is offensive, whether physically or verbally, and that is a manifestation of the person’s aggression.

Pupils’ aggressive behaviour is a serious educational problem requiring special attention not only at the theoretical-empirical level, but also in school practice. According to A. Heretik (2010, p. 319) “aggression” is a behavioural unit, a response to a stimulus, that can be characterized by such properties as offensiveness, violence, destruction. Aggression is deliberate conduct with the aim to harm another person, an object or an animal. According to D.L. Daly (2011, p.5) aggression is deliberate behaviour that may cause psychological or physical harm to others and have a variety of forms. D.L. Daly (2011), H. Mynard and S. Joseph (2000) classify the following as the forms of aggression: physical (physical assaults, fights...), verbal (verbal assaults, bad language) and social (manipulation, isolation, spreading negative or false information). The term “aggression” is closely connected with the term “aggressiveness”, defined by S. Kariková (2008, p. 18) as a “relatively permanent personality disposition or characteristic to behave aggressively”. According to Kariková (2011, p. 386), aggression is manifested externally as aggressive behaviour where “...a person asserts oneself at the expense of another, disregards the rights of the other, tends to humiliate, insult and belittle the other. In social relationships, the person constantly fights, manipulates and likes to command others.”

Pupils’ aggressive behaviour towards teachers continues to be a current phenomenon at Slovak schools, with a tendency of gradual increase. It is stated also in the *Report on the State of Education in Slovakia and System Steps to Promote its Further Development* (2013) by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Slovak Republic (p. 50): “Threatening children’s and pupils’ safety, teaching and non-teaching staff at school (bullying pupils, attacks on teachers by pupils or their legal representatives) is considered a considerable problem”.

Pupils’ aggressive behaviour is paid considerable attention also abroad. According to the official report by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), approx. 20% of teachers at public schools reported having been attacked by pupils verbally, 10% reported having been physically threatened by pupils and 5% reported having been physically assaulted by pupils at school.

The authors M. Lokmic, S. Opic, V. Bilic (2013) carried out empirical research in selected elementary and secondary schools in the Republic of Croatia, aimed to monitor the occurrence of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers. In their study, the above authors reported that 28% of their respondents (teachers) had experience with pupils' aggressive behaviour towards their persons at least once a year, 25.6% of the teachers responded that they had no experience with aggressive behaviour towards their persons and 21.3% of the teachers responded that they experienced pupils' aggressive behaviour towards their persons once a week.

Methodological background and methods of research

Bullying pupils by teachers is paid considerable attention in the Slovak professional literature, but the issue of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers, or pupils' bullying teachers has been so far treated only marginally. The increase in this risk behaviour, however, prompts social need to pay them greater attention also in the field of empirical research by institutions of higher education training future teachers for elementary and secondary schools. That is the reason why in 2016 empirical research was carried out with the aim to find out and examine the occurrence and forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at selected elementary schools in the region of Central Slovakia. One of the research objectives was to find out causes of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at elementary schools in the Banská Bystrica and Žilina regions. Empirical data were collected using a self-designed questionnaire, containing a set of open-ended, closed-ended, combined and scaled items. The rate of return of the questionnaires by teachers at the elementary school second level was 92.80%.

The research sample consisted of 232 respondents – teachers at the elementary school second level in the Banská Bystrica and Žilina regions. The research was carried out in 21 elementary schools in Slovakia. Within the Žilina region, the research was carried out:

- In the town Turčianske Teplice,
- In the villages Benice, Mošovce, Horná Štubňa

Within the Banská Bystrica region, the research was carried out:

- In the towns Sliač, Zvolen, Banská Bystrica, Lučenec, Rimavská Sobota;
- In the villages Slovenská Lupča, Lubietová, Poniky, Hrochoť, Valaská, Čierny Balog, Halič, Janova Lehota.

The most numerous representation in the research sample was of teachers with teaching experience of 26 and more years ($n=22\%$); the lowest portion was that of beginning teachers with teaching experience of 0 to 5 years ($n=10.34\%$).

The research objectives were specified as follows:

- Find out the rate of incidence of pupils' aggressive behaviour forms occurs at the second level of selected elementary schools;
- Find out causes of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers;
- Find out the frequency of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers;
- Find out whether there is a statistically significant difference between the occurrence of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at elementary schools in the towns and in the country.

To find out the occurrence of forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers, the median value and average frequency of individual forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at the examined schools were used.

Along with the questionnaire method, an unstructured individual interview was used in the research, as well as content analysis of preventive educational activity with the professional staff of centres for pedagogical counselling and prevention. The professional staff were intentionally selected for the research sample, by the common sign of directly co-operating with the examined schools, so that the interviews integrated and reflected the variability of information, opinions and experience concerning the issue studied.

Results

Pupils' aggressive behaviour is a serious educational problem disrupting not only the teaching-learning process, but also functioning of the whole class and that is why it must be paid due attention. That was the reason why our research focused on finding out forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour.

It was found out that 25.00% of the respondents (teachers) with teaching experience of 6–10 years had experienced pupils' aggressive behaviour towards their persons. The lowest occurrence of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards their persons was reported by 1.29% of the teachers with teaching experience of 21–25 years. Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers was absent only in 20.26% of the respondents, which is a negative finding from the pedagogical point of view. Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers occurred most frequently in male pupils, thus boys at elementary schools in towns. Participation of pupils of the male and feminine gender in aggressive behaviour towards teachers was 60.29%.

According to the teachers' responses, pupils' aggressive behaviour towards them was occurring almost daily, except for a direct physical assault on a teacher (direct physical aggression). Frequent physical aggression towards teachers by pupils was reported by 6 respondents.

Table 1. Forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers; regional aspect

	AM		Total AM	Total Me
	Towns	Villages		
Direct physical aggression (a blow, a slap)	0.53	0.50	0.53	0.0
Indirect physical aggression	1.80	1.96	1.86	2.0
Mockery	2.58	2.44	2.53	3.0
Back-talk	4.08	3.60	3.88	4.0
Deliberately disobeying orders	3.58	3.28	3.46	3.5
Intimidation	1.86	1.34	1.65	2.0
Threats	1.53	1.32	1.45	1.0
Irony	2.64	2.32	2.51	3.0
Verbal insults	2.91	2.83	2.88	3.0
Vulgarisms	3.69	3.76	3.72	4.0
Offensive gestures	3.06	3.06	3.07	3.0
Raised voice	3.17	2.93	3.07	3.0
Ignoring	3.11	2.98	2.51	3.0
Deliberately invading the intimate zone	1.46	1.36	1.42	1.0
None	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.0

0 = never, 1 = once a school-year, 2 = once a half-year, 3 = once a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = daily

In the regional aspect, a significant difference was recorded in the respondents' option "Back-talk" as a manifestation of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers, more frequently reported by the teachers from towns (4.08) than the teachers from villages (3.6). The most frequent manifestation of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers was in the form of "Vulgarisms", with similar representation in towns and villages.

The individual forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour presented in Table 1 were differentiated in the tables below similarly as by P. Koršňáková and J. Kováčová (2010), by the index of pupils' indiscipline and the index of serious transgressions.

Tables 2 and 3 show the forms of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at the examined elementary schools, and were applied Welsh's two-sample t-test to compare the index of pupils' indiscipline and the index of serious transgressions in the regional context.

Table 2. Index of pupils' indiscipline towards teachers

AM Town	AM Village
3.41	3.24
$t = 1.22777$ $df = 205.684$	
$p - \text{value} = 0.221$	

t = value of Welsh's test, df = degrees of freedom, p - value

Table 3. Index of serious transgressions against teachers

AM Town	AM Village
1.94	1.77
$t = 1.3995$ $df = 188.394$	
$P - \text{value} = 0.1633$	

t = value of Welsh's test, df = degrees of freedom, p - value

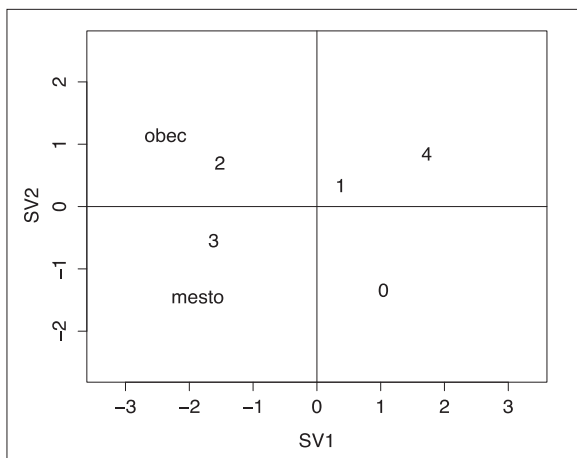


Figure 1. Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers; regional aspect

1 singular value decomposition 1, SV2 - singular value decomposition 2, obec = village, mesto = town

From the regional aspect, there was no statistically significant difference between milder and more serious forms of pupils' aggressive behaviours towards teachers. The average index of pupils' indiscipline towards teachers was 3.41 at the examined schools situated in towns and 3.24 in villages. Also in the regional aspect, no statistically significant differences were recorded in the frequency of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at the examined schools. The average frequency of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers at elementary schools situated in towns was once a week, while reported as once a month by the respondents in villages. From the regional aspect, the prevailing frequency of the index of pupils' serious transgressions against teachers at the examined schools was once a half-year.

The tables below show the composition of the selected sample of teachers from the examined schools by their gender and possible settlement of the occurring conflict situations by the teachers' gender.

Table 4. Teaching staff composition by gender

Alternatives	Women		Men		TOTAL	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
Teachers of the elementary school 2nd level	194	83.62	38	16.38	232	100

Table 5. Possible settlement of conflict situations by the teachers' gender

Possible settlement of conflict situations	Women		Men		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Cooperation with the pupil's class teacher and parents	221	95.25	6	2.59	227	97.84
Personal talk with the aggressive pupil	188	81.03	35	15.09	223	96.12
Effort to explain the aggressor that he/she behaves inappropriately	206	88.80	15	6.46	221	95.26
Cooperation with the school management and other institutions (e.g. Centres for Pedagogical Counselling and Prevention)	213	92.24	2	0.86	215	93.10
Cooperation with Prevention Coordinator/Educational Counsellor	193	83.20	15	6.46	208	89.66
Note in the pupil's mark-book	203	87.50	1	0.43	204	87.93
Cooperation with school professional staff	170	73.28	1	0.43	171	73.71
Effort to change the teaching style during next classes	155	66.81	7	3.02	162	69.83
Raising voice	102	43.97	13	5.60	115	49.57
Ignoring	16	6.89	6	2.59	22	9.48

To test the forms and methods applied by the teachers to settle conflict situations with pupils Fischer's test was used, however, no statistically significant difference was found from the aspect of the teachers' gender, thus no values are given in a table. Currently there still persists feminization of the teaching staff documented in Table 4. Our research found out that up to 227 teachers preferred possible settlement of conflict situations in cooperation with the class teacher and the pupil's parents, with the prevalence of women teachers, which is 95.25%. Another appropriate method was the teacher's (victim's) personal talk with the pupil (aggressor), reported by 188 women teachers and 35 men teachers. The empirical research also showed a considerable difference in the strategy of conflict situation settlement by gender of the teachers at the examined schools. The teachers were of the same opinion on appropriate settlement of conflict situations in the form of teacher's talk with the pupil.

When comparing the opinions of the respondents of the questionnaire research and those of the participants of the unstructured interview concerning prevention of pupils' aggressive behaviour, certain discrepancies were observed, giving evidence of insufficient interest of schools in preventive activities offered by the centres studied. The content analysis of the plans of preventive activities showed that centres offered schools a wide range of preventive activities and programmes in this respect for various age groups of pupils.

The teachers of the research evaluated the existing quality of the support service by the participants as relevant to their work, although they did not use it sufficiently.

All respondents and participants in the research equally stated that the key to the prevention of, but especially to dealing with, aggressive behaviour is the school – family co-operation.

Discussion

In its study APA (American Psychological Association) presents results of several surveys that are certain starting points for the national research and the political programme of the government. One of the surveys of 2005, carried out in 254 elementary and secondary schools, focused on causes of aggressive behaviour towards teachers by pupils at the elementary school second level. Based on the survey results, experts (D. Espelage, E.M. Anderman, V.E. Brown, A. Jones, K. Lynne Lane, S.D. McMahon, L.A. Reddy, C.R. Reynolds, 2013) arrived at the conclusion

that a lack of teacher authority had the greatest influence on origination and development of aggressive behaviour.

The results of our research founded on the Likert scale (occurrence frequency 2.75) show that at the examined schools, a lack of teacher authority was considered a significant cause of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers, which was reported most frequently by teachers with 11–15 years' and 26 and more years' experience. The examined teachers reported parenting faults as the most frequent cause of pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers (1.52).

In the National Report of the OECD international research TALIS, P. Koršňáková and J. Kováčová (2010) differentiated pupils' misbehaviour by two indices: *the index of pupils' indiscipline* (incidence rate of such behaviours as classroom disturbance, vulgarisms / bad language, absenteeism, cheating, late-comings) and *the index of serious transgressions* (incidence rate of such behaviours as vandalism, intimidation of other pupils, theft, intimidation of teachers, physical injuries to other pupils, use of drugs or alcohol). In Slovakia, values of *the index of serious transgressions* were only half values of the index of pupils' indiscipline (SR: 0.27, elementary schools: 0.29, eight-year secondary grammar school: 0.14), which means that the given transgressions occurred sporadically at the examined schools (use of drugs or alcohol and physical injuries to other pupils were the least frequent). The *index of pupils' indiscipline* had significantly higher values - with moderate occurrence in Slovakia (SR: 0.45, elementary schools: 0.47, eight-year secondary grammar school: 0.36). In individual components of the index, statistically significant deviations from the Slovak average were found in the Bratislava region (problem with pupils' absences, index 16.8, smaller when compared to 57.8 in the Žilina region) and in the Prešov region (problem with pupils' vulgarity and bad language, index 14.6, smaller when compared to 53.6 in the Žilina region).

In 2015 S. Fatima, M.P. Scholar, S.K. Malik carried out research designed similarly to our research. Their research results showed that boys were more aggressive than girls. Girls, but also boys, had low tolerance to criticism of their personality or school performance. The main difference observed between manifestations of aggressiveness in girls and boys was found in selection of the forms of aggression. Girls were more inclined to verbal manifestations of aggressive behaviour towards teachers and physical manifestations were typical of boys.

Empirical research by several authors (I. Emmerová 2014, K. Hollá 2013, P. Munn 2009, S.R. Neill 2001 and others) shows that verbal aggressive behaviours during classes, but also threats to teachers by pupils, pupils' parents or other relatives are the most frequent form of elementary school pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers.

The *Report on the State of Education in Slovakia and on the System Steps to Promote its Further Development* states that disrupted social relationships in the classroom, underestimation of the seriousness of aggressive behaviour indications in children and pupils appear to be a big problem and also the cause of aggressive behaviour. The *Report...* further specifies the following partial tasks to be solved for the problems to be cured:

- Make teacher continual education more intense in the field of conflict situation management;
- Examine the possibilities and extent of using camera systems in schools;
- Increase the number of professional staff for the field of prevention, and other.

In this respect, it is also important that schools are strengthened by professionals for the field of prevention where especially social pedagogues are helpful, as referred to also in the Act No. 317/20019 on teaching staff and professional staff, Section 24.

For the prevention of pupils' aggressive behaviour in schools to be effective, it is necessary to implement long-term preventive programmes involving the widest possible community of pupils, parents and teachers in co-operation with professionals and institutions dealing with socio-pathological behaviour prevention at the professional level. Several authors, such as, e. g. C. David-Ferdon, 2014, M. O'Moore, 2010, R. Green, 2010, D.L. Daly, 2011, set forth that to carry out preventive activities, school should draw up and implement in the educational process a strategy against aggressive behaviour and/or bullying, apply disciplinary methods to pupils' aggressive behaviours, intensify school supervision of pupils, work out classroom rules, organize school meetings, inform parents and pupils about prevention of aggressive behaviour and how it is addressed, organize events for them, work out a plan for help to victims of aggressive behaviour, etc. The professional staff at school should focus their preventive activities on development of pupils', but also teachers' social skills, with regard to support of protective factors, effective solution of problems, development of social communication, social perception, anger management, self-reflection, self-regulation, etc.

D. Espelage, E.M. Anderman, V.E. Brown, A. Jones, K. Lynne Lane, S.D. McMahon, L.A. Reddy, C.R. Reynolds (2013) state that prevention of pupils' aggressive behaviour requires teachers to apply preventive programmes at schools with regard to conflict settlement. It is also relevant to strengthen teacher training in institutions of higher education to produce a new generation of teachers with an adequate amount of knowledge, managerial skills for work in the classroom. It is necessary to provide teachers continual education and various forms of supportive counselling.

Conclusion

Pupils' aggressive behaviour towards teachers is one of serious phenomena the occurrence of which has currently an increasing tendency. It is not uncommon, that teachers at schools are often confronted by aggressive behaviours of pupils towards one another, but also towards school teaching staff and professional staff. School, as the professional educational institution, has a team of erudite professionals, thus it should in the first place prevent pupils' aggressive behaviour, but also settle arising conflict situations adequately and effectively. Causes of aggressive behaviour should be established early, diagnosed correctly and dealt with in cooperation with professional staff, especially social pedagogues with such competencies specified in the Act No. 317/2009 on teaching staff and professional staff. It is especially the competence to carry out prevention, socio-pedagogical diagnostics of environment and relationships, socio-pedagogical counselling and behaviour re-education. Social pedagogues fulfil tasks of social education, support of pro-social, ethical behaviour and also perform expertise activities and adult education activities.

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