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FACTORS OF PEER VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Abstract:

The problem of violence in schools causes considerable concern in many countries of the world and in our country as well because of the enormous psychological and physical consequences it brings to children and young people. In literature, research can be found even forty years ago, when this phenomenon was defined as aggressive, deliberate, and persistent action carried out by a group or individual against a victim who cannot be easily defended. More recently, violence is not only considered to be physical, but also violence can also be experiences through social networks, which gives us an additional incentive for its further study, all in order to stand in the way of violence and reduce it as much as possible. This paper studies the theoretical and empirical knowledge about some significant factors that contribute to the occurrence of peer violence, such as: family, school environment and personality characteristics of the bully and the victim. At the end, an overview of effective violence prevention programs from different countries in the world is given.

Keywords: *peer violence, family, school, personality characteristics, prevention programs*

Introduction

Very often media report on various types of violence among young people, and especially worrying are those that occur in schools, which can escalate to a large scale. Peer violence has negative consequences on children (students) in school, but also on the entire school atmosphere and the child`s right to learn in a safe environment, without fear. Therefore, peer violence as a complex problem has been researched by several authors who intensively study the prevalence, forms and ways of manifestations, causes and consequences of peer violence. A number of reports and studies show that about 15% of students are either victims of violence or are initiators of violence (Olweus, 1993). When studying violence between peers, it is necessary to take into account the social context in which the child grows up. The family is the primary factor of child`s socialization and also an institution that shapes the child`s personality and behaviour. It is thought to have the longest impact on every aspect of child`s and young person`s life. For this reason, the scientific community especially refers to the parents' relationship and the child`s violent behaviour (Papanikolaou, et al., 2011), that is, it focusses on how the upbringing and disciplining of the child in the family is related to taking on different roles of peer violence: victims, bullies, or victim/bullies (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). Baldry and Farrington's research (Baldry & Farrington, 1998) found that children who identified as bullies/victims described their parents as authoritarian, punitive, and less supportive of their children. On the other hand, schools that do not have well-defined policies and plan to prevent violence can be said to be a factor in violent behaviour among peers. A child's personality characteristics are also a factor in peer violence. Bullies are usually children who are without adequate control from adults, who have been victims of other bullies, who are without a positive model of imitation and identification, and in whom physical and psychological characteristic allow them to dominate other children (Marsh et al., 2018). Peer violence in schools has always existed, and on a smaller scale it can be part of a child`s socialization with peers, but lately it has become more and more massive and brutal and takes on new forms such as online violence. Because of this, in the last few decades, peer violence prevention programs have been developed around the world that can help schools provide a safe and healthy learning environment, as well as better learning conditions. In this paper, in addition to defining peer violence, we also present the factors that contribute to the occurrence of violence: family, school, peers, but also the personality characteristics of the bully and the victim. Several of the most current programs for the prevention of peer violence in the schools from several countries around the world will also be presented.

Peer violence – bullying

There are numerous definitions of the term bullying or peer violence and, at the same time they vary so much that sometimes it seems that it does not need to be defined. However, a general definition of violence is that it is the

intentional and frequent infliction of emotional and physical pain on another that gives pleasure to the abuser (Wolfgang, 2009). In terms of children`s gender, boys are more likely to commit physical acts of violence, while girls are more involved in indirect activities such as spreading rumours or isolating others (Nansel et al., 2001). Olweus reports (Olweus, 1993) that violence tends to peak between the ages of 11 and 13 or in the transition period from primarily to secondarily school.

As the use and importance of the Internet increases in the lives of young people and as children become involved in social networks at an earlier age, electronic or cyber violence becomes another way in which someone enjoys harming another. The definition of cyber violence is that it is "an aggressive intentional act carried out by a group or individual using a mobile phone or the Internet, multiple times over a period of time against a defenceless victim" (Smit, 2019). There is a lot of evidence that children and young people who participate in cyber violence are also involved in so-called traditional violence. An attack that takes place in the schoolyard can lead to revenge online, just as an online attack can result in a face-to face confrontation, the next day. This type of violence has a very wide range. There are: attacks and threats via electronic messages, e-mails, social media posts, insults, flaming (online verbal sparring), cyber-stalking (persistent online intimidation), impersonating (impersonating someone to upload or send material to someone's detriment), posting false information or unwanted pictures about someone, getting involved in online games and putting up fake online profiles, distributing personal materials against the will of the other person.

Some of the basic features of electronic violence have long been known and have been written about for a long time. One is particularly important in the sense of motivation for bulling others. Cyber violence is primarily indirect, compared to direct face-to-face violence; if he/she hides his/her identity there is a possibility that the cyber bully will remain "anonymous" or invisible. This can reduce the possible risk for revenge. One theory (Smit, 2019) calls this violence „nerds' revenge" because a weaker child who is bullied in the schoolyard has an opportunity to fight back. On the other hand, the cyber bully does not see the reaction of the victim, at least not in the short term. It could reduce the pleasure the bully takes in displaying his/her power over others. The other characteristics are more important when we talk about the possible effects on the victim of electronic violence (in relation to direct traditional peer violence). *One* is that with cyber violence, the potential audience is much larger, since in cyberspace thousands of people can visit a page. Potentially that's an unlimited number of visitors. *The other* characteristic is that it is difficult for a person to escape cyber violence, while in traditional violence in the time after school, in the evening, on weekends, holidays, vacations, the person can take refuge to some extent, opposite to being subjected to electronic violence at any time. This violence could be stopped if the victim stopped using their cell phone or the

internet, but this would be a drastic and unacceptable step for many young people these days.

Family as a factor of peer violence

Children who are abusers are not a random deviation, but they are natural results of the way in which they are raised today in poor, well-to-do, or even rich families. If we look around: if once happy families were the norm, today more and more often we see parents and children running "crazily" from one activity to another, usually fulfilling the ambitions of the parents, their children resenting it, throwing tantrums, and the parents trying not to pay attention to it. However, every parent has a different approach in how they communicate and guide their children. Child's morals, principles, and behaviour are generally established through the parent-child relationship that defines the child as an individual person in a particular historical time, place, and circumstance (Šo & Vud, 2003).

The question arises as to what was the relationship between parents and children who were involved in bullying activities, and what characteristics these parents have. Shetgiri and colleagues (Shetgiri et al., 2012) studied parental characteristics associated with peer violence in children aged 10 to 17. It was found that parent-child communication, as meeting and getting to know the child's friends, supporting the child in school activities, was associated with less experiences of violence. On the other hand, the children of parents with negative perceptions of the child and the less optimal mental health of mothershad more experience with peer violence. Hence, parental skills for interacting with the child, parental perceptions of the child, and maternal mental health can be used as indicators of children at risk of being bullies.

There are several ways of parental behaviour that can be cause of encouraging violent behaviour in a child (Rigby, 2007). *First*, dysfunctional families do not help a child develop *empathy*, it's the other way around even. Parents who do not care and accept the child as he/she is, and do not care about the child's feelings, result in the child's empathy being absent or low. If their parents don't take care of them, why should they take care of others? *Second*, those parents don't engage the child in the family to take care of others. Everyone in the family "goes their own way". Not caring for others is another reason for the development of violence against others in the child. *Third*, an adolescent in a dysfunctional family is not accepted by parents and older siblings and is considered a child and an immature person. This creates a feeling of inferiority and dissatisfaction as a result of being dominated by others. And f*ourth*, the child is not encouraged to develop positive social values such as honesty and sincerity.

In Rigby's study (Rigby, 1994) of an adolescent's relationship with his/her family (where participants were 644 adolescents in Australia), for the adolescents who on the testing (with the instrument Family Functioning Adolescence Questionnaire-FFAQ) appeared to be violent, it was found that

they differ from others, in the way they perceive their family as functional or dysfunctional. Their responses to the test were: "My family does not sympathize with me when I am sad"; "My family doesn't care about working together and helping each other solve problems"; "My family still considers me a child and an immature person"; "My father does not care about me, and does not accept me as I am"; "Honesty is not important in my family"; "We don't care about the feeling of others in the family" It was concluded that children, regardless of gender, in poorly functioning families are prone to violence against others. But not all violent children have such families. In the study mentioned above, **no** statistically significant relationship was found between the functionality of the family and the tendency to violence in the child. There are children who are often violent towards others, and they come from families who care for them a lot, and are proud of them. But pride can be misdirected when parents accept and encourage aggression in their children.

More is known about the families of violent children, probably because our society is more concerned with investigating the perpetrator of aggression and violence, but it is important to understand the victim as well. In what kind of family do children who are victims of violence live? If the families of the bullies are insufficiently cohesive and supportive, the victims' families are at the other extreme, that is, the members in those families are too connected, so that the child does not acquire the skills to effectively interact with the outside world (Rigby, 2007). In these families, children are usually overprotected by their parents.

In psychological theories of parenting such as Emotional Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), Parental acceptance and rejection theory (Rohner, 1984), Family System Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) *parental warmthand love* are talked about as being an essential element of the child-parent bonding, as an indication that the child is accepted by the parent and belongs to the family, and is the basis for the child's good mental health. Acceptance is reflected in the support, care, love, and encouragement provided by the parents to the child which results in a feeling of comfort in the presence of the parents and includes the child's awareness of being accepted as a person. And contrary to this, the parent who does not accept or rejects his/her child behaves rudely with the child, avoids touch (cuddling, kissing) and conversation. But there are two more components of the parent-child interaction style, namely: *control* versus *autonomy* of the child's behaviour, and *consistency and clarity* versus *inconsistency and ambiguity* in disciplinary procedures (Baumrind & Black, 1967). The second-dimension *control* over the child versus *autonomy* refers to the restrictions that parents place on their children in various areas (table manners, orderliness, control of the aggressive behaviour, etc.). Research has shown that pronounced restrictive parental behaviour prevents the development of independence in the child, but the lack of control also leads to unwanted consequences. What kind of behaviour does the child have if the parents do not set clear boundaries in his/her behaviour? That child will impulsively manifest his/her needs. For

example, he/she cries if he/she isn't provided something he/she wants, and his/her parents can't provide it for him/her, he/she will show maximum aggression towards others if something is not according to his/her will, as an adolescent he/she can show delinquent behaviour such as consuming alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, and will not take responsibility for his/her actions. Furthermore, successful disciplinary procedures are *consistent and clear*. In other words, the child knows why he/she is punished or rewarded, and to the same behaviour the parents always react, more or less, in the same way. Inconsistent punishment generally fails to reduce or eliminate the behaviour being punished. The most aggressive are those children whose parents sometimes allow, and sometimes punish aggressive behaviour.

The school as a factor of peer violence

From the family, the children enter the institution of school, still remaining in the family. School has many similarities with family, it reflects important figures and relationships that exist in the family, so it is sometimes explained to the children that when they go to school, they enter another new extended family. The parent's authority sometimes corresponds to the teacher's authority, classmates are new siblings with whom long term interaction begins, and adults monitor that interaction and intervene in conflict as needed (Popadić, 2009). Hence, if it is important for the development of aggressiveness how the parent react to the aggressiveness of the child and how much the parent uses punishment and power, then it is also important in the school how the teachers react and how they use punishment and aggression as a model. The teacher-student relationship would have the same effects as parent-child relationship, and the adverse consequences of an inadequate parent-child relationship could possibly be corrected by an adequate teacher-student relationship and vice versa.

How is the school placed in the context of violence? Natvig and colleagues (Natvig et al, 2001) found that school-related stress and school alienation are potential risk factor for violent behaviour in Norwegian adolescents. Other research considers "peer group contextual effects" as a cause of peer violence (Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Brown (Brown, 2003, according to Jung, 2018) indicates that apart from victim-bully relationship, more peer relations are based on voluntary interactions that reflect mutuality, reciprocity, and positive companionship. In the victim-bullying relationship, both are rejected by their peers, although the bullies are the more aggressive partner in that relationship. In other words, bullies look for vulnerable peers to be their victims, while victims seem to make themselves available target.

The emotional climate in the class is also considered a source of violence in the school context, and it can be: competition, boredom, apathy, fear, too extensive program, long sitting in the school desks, carrying heavy bags, request for mechanical learning etc. (Rigby, 2007). From here it can be seen that violence cannot be reduced only to physical violence, not even to insults and

threats. For example, subtle ways of violence can be: ironic addresses, asking unclear questions on purpose, deliberate keeping in suspense, inconsistency in demands, breaking contract and promises, etc. Violence in schools is often born from attempts to discipline students harshly and inadequately. What needs to be emphasized is that there should be warm and encouraging climate in schools and that the relationship between the children, and the children and the teacher should be in a spirit of mutual respect. An authoritative (democratic) school climate should prevail in the school. A safe and effective school should be, at the same time *structured* and *encouraging* (Smit, 2019). *The structure* is made up of high expectations for students' discipline and learning achievement. Teachers should enforce discipline strictly but fairly. *Encouragement* and support arise from good communication between the student and the teacher, an interaction full of respect, understanding and care between the students themselves, teachers, and other staff of the school. When asked whether schools are considered safe places for children and whether children bring weapons, such as knives or guns to school, the answer to several polls in several countries around the world is that these are rare cases, and serious injuries to students are rare (Neill, 2005; Rigby, 2007; Wolke, 2000). But when we talk about endangering safety, we don't mean only physical safety, but also the feeling of being threatened when there is a penetration of fear or anxiety due to the possibility of injury from others.

Personality characteristics as a factor in peer violence

Although it is known that some behavioural problems (anxiety, hyperactivity, depression, etc.) are inherited, this should not create a feeling of hopelessness that nothing can be fixed, but quite the contrary, the upbringing and the environment that surrounds the child (family, school, peers, media…) has a significant role in its correction and in developing certain behaviours. In general, *violent behaviour* appears in children who usually have the following *characteristics*: they are usually stronger and more physically developed than average children, more aggressive, impulsive, have low empathy, low cooperativeness (Rigby & Slee, 1993). They are usually successful in sports and physical games. They want to control and dominate other, it amuses them to mistreat others, especially physically weaker ones. They have no compassion for their victims. They need to be respected, but they do not distinguish respect from fear. Impressing others is important to them. Most of them are insecure and sad, although there are individuals who are not like that. They are irritable and impulsive; they hardly tolerate failures. Their popularity among other students is average to below average and decreases with age. They are usually surrounded by two to three students. They tend to lie and are unable and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions (Olweus, 1993). An important characteristic is that some bullies show their strength in one-on-one situations, and some are violent when in group or gang. In the second case, the abuser is more socialized and conformist. However, there are exceptions to these generalizations. For example, physical size and strength are more important

for men, while for women, violence is more psychological and verbal, such as the ability to mock, gossip, ignore someone. But there are bullies who are anxious and those who are calm. Then, not infrequently, the bullies themselves are sometimes also victims.

The characteristics of the *victim's personality* are: they are physically weaker than others, not assertive, introverted, they have low self-esteem, and they have only few friends. Victims may also be discriminated against because of some social characteristic, for example if they belong to a minority such as an ethnic group or an individual characteristic (Graham & Juvonen, 2002). Not infrequently, children with special needs are victims of peer violence. Child victims are usually physically weaker than their peers (especially boys), are less successful in sports, have poor body coordination (Olweus & Endersen, 1998). They are timid and insecure and easily become the target of attacks, although some of them are successful in school and in creative activities. They are not prone to violence, do not challenge others and usually withdraw. Other children tease them, make fun of them, and belittle them and so on. They are often excluded from the peer group and are not liked in the playgroup. While they are smaller, they are near the teacher or other adults.

Research shows that school violence can have long-lasting negative consequences for the victim (Rigby & Slee, 1993). Typical victims are often afraid to go to school and complain of headaches. In relation to other students, they show a lack of self-esteem, they are exposed to the risk of later becoming anxious, depressed, and sometimes suicidal. They often suffer in silence, think poorly of themselves, and lack friends (Smit, 2019). It should be emphasized that these are generalizations about the personal characteristics of the bullies and victims, and the danger of stereotyping and labelling is always present.

Programs for the prevention of peer violence

One of the strategies for dealing with peer violence is the **reactive strategy**, which is response to the incident in which the violence occurred. Schools have a number of strategies they can implement. There is no-size-fits-all solution for all schools, but schools should still apply disciplinary measures to students who behave violently, to make it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable. Punitive measures are also used in European countries, but in some cases, they are reduced to serious discussion with the stakeholders. Many countries apply reactive approaches, and fewer apply some kind of **non**-punitive measures.

The term *disciplinary measure* implies some kind of direct sanctions for the perpetrator of peer violence. However, they differ in degree of difficulty. The mildest ones are serious conversations and a verbal warning, which is given by the class teacher and in many schools, it is the first step, apart from the Council of parents in school. A more severe punishment requires parents or guardians to be called to speak with the class teacher. A possible measure is to temporally move the student to another class, to deny him access to the school

yard, or to revoke some privileges or awards. The next level of punishment can be staying longer in school or assigning tasks such as picking up trash or cleaning the school. Serious cases and multiple degrees of transgression may lead to temporary exclusion of the student from school, while the final measure is permanent exclusion from school. The sanctions implemented by the school mainly vary depending on the type of peer violence, the severity of the violence and whether the offense is a first or a repeated one. There are clear guidelines for sanctions. Those sanctions are public consequences for the bully that demonstrate what bullying is unacceptable and are consistent with the school's policy regarding suppression of peer violence. They also show that school rules and policies should be taken seriously. In this way, the students are brought up to understand the limits of acceptable behaviour both for the bully and for the other students. The abuser needs to face the harm he/she has done in order to learn from what he/she has done. Disciplinary measures are also a deterrent factor. The punishment should deter the bully from repeated violent behaviour, as well as deter other students from any similar behaviour.

The most famous program for the prevention of violence in schools is the **Olweus Bullying Prevention Program,** which focuses on designs according to the age of children in Norway (Popadić, 2009). That program was designed based on previous research related to school violence. The main idea of that program is to create conditions in the school that will increase the positive consequences of the behaviour, and reduce negative consequences of violence. The central element of the program can be called *"rules and consequences"*. The basic message is that violence is unacceptable and is specified through a series of rules that are presented to the students in a very clear and visible way, and since they originate from the students and not from outside, the students will be expected to responsibly approach their observation. The rules are sent with messages about the consequences of their adherence or violent.

According to Olweus, the program consists of three groups of measures: at the school level, at the class level and at the individual level. *Measures at the school level* include scanning the situation, a school meeting regarding the problems of violence (getting to know the situation in schools and the actions that are intended to be taken). The basic message of the whole program is "We do not accept violence". *Measures at the class level*, with the students and the teacher, where the problem of violence at the class level is first discussed, from which several rules would emerge. The rules would clearly describe the norms that everyone agreed on as the positive and negative reactions, such as rewards (if adhered to) and sanctions (if not adhered to). Olweus (1993) suggests several punishments: a serious conversation between the teacher and the students (in private) the student is sent to sit in front of the principal's office during recess, the student spends several hours in another class, which can also happen in a class with younger students, the student must accompany the supervising teacher during the school break, the student is sent to a serious conversation with the principal, the student is deprived of some benefits, or is to attend the

teachers meeting with the parents. Rewards are group work where collaborative learning is fostered. *Measures at the individual level* refer to serious conversations with bullies and victims, and with their parents, where neutral students also participate. Help and support is given to the parents of both the abuser and the victim.

The **Roland`s program called "zero" emerged** from this program in which greater importance is attached to factors related to school and classes and which are indirectly related to violence (Smit, 2019). They believe that directly targeting violence is not always best because these programs impose additional activities on teachers that they are not usually motivated to do. Instead, the pedagogical work of *teachers and school condition should be improved*, because according to them, violence is a consequence of the inadequate management of the school and class.

One of the more significant programs is the **Sheffield Program** in Great Britain. The mandatory part consists of raising the level of awareness about the problem of violence, consultations inside the school, developing the school strategy as an available document that prescribes the sanctions and responsibilities of everyone in the community, applying the programs and adjusting them after the evaluation. Training to strengthen victim was applied, as well as group work with bullies according to Anatol Pikas(Pikas, 2002) which is based on *showing great empathy* of the teacher towards the victim and trying to develop such empathy in the bully. He/she asks them for suggestions on how to help the victim. After a week, the teacher talks to the bullies again to hear what they have done in the meantime, i.e., whether their efforts to help the victim were successful or not.

Another approach to non-punitive methods is the **restorative approach** (Popadić, 2009) where punishment can be counterproductive. A restorative approach represents a middle ground between punishment and non-punishment, the goal is for the perpetrators *to bear responsibility* for their actions and to gain awareness of the damage they inflict on the victim. The main focus is on holding a meeting and conversation with everyone involved in the violence, with the aim of repairing or restoring good relations and not to punish the preparator. The emphasis is not on blaming "you broke the rules and it has to stop" but on what you can do to *fix* your relationship. This approach is guided by three main principles: responsibility – the perpetrator learns to accept responsibility for the damage he/she has caused; reparation – involves the victim while attributing reparative actions to make it easier for the offender to repair the damage and pain he/she has caused; resolution – a successful end to the conflict and the students communicates freely without threats and conflicts.

The Finnish **KiVa program** against school violence was developed by Kristina Salmivali with colleagues between 2006 and 2009 (Herkama, Saarento-Zaprudin & Salmivalli, 2017). KIVa is an abbreviation of the expression Kiusaamista Vastaan, which translates as "*against violence*", and the acronym *kiva* means good or beautiful in Finnish. The effectiveness of this program has

been scientifically proven through large national rigorously controlled research and several scientific studies. This program is used worldwide and is the most current program to fight violence in schools. This program is partly based on the typical roles that exist in situations of violence: *bully, non-involved children* (who are neither bullies nor victims), *victims and bully-victims*. According to Salmivali and colleagues (Herkama et al., 2017) participant roles in violence have sub-roles. The role of *bully* has the following sub-roles: *leader* (one who initiates and carries out the violent act), *assistant* (one who follows the leader and joins him/her in the violence) and *supporter* (one who does not get involved directly, but passively supports the bully). Under the roles of *non-involved* are: *defenders* (who resist the bully and defend the victim by asking for help from the teacher), *non-involved observers* (do not interfere and do not defend), and *outsiders* (who are not aware of the existence of violence). While under the roles of the *victims* are: *passive victims* (who did not give a reason to attack) and *provocative victims* (who are in some way irritating and thus provoke the behaviour of the bully).

This context of roles in peer violence is important and is taken as an essential aspect of anti-bulling work, in which peer *defenders* play a significant role. KiVa contains *universal interventions* (for everyone, e.g., in the classroom) and *targeted interventions* (for those involved as bullies and victims). *Universal interventions* include class with all students, for example, a theme day where discussions, films are shown and exercises are done on the topic of peer violence. *Targeted interventions* are based on the teams of three teachers in the school to whom the student should turn in case of violence. They talk to the students involved in the incident and provide support to the victim. In the meantime, the teacher meets with the students of high social status in the victim's class and asks them to provide support to the victim.

From the research on the effects of preventive programs in primary and secondary schools, across several countries in the world (Jenson & Dieterich, 2007), it was found that they give results, that is, the interventions significantly reduce peer violence, especially in primary schools.

Conclusion

From the perspective of many studies, peer violence in schools is a complex problem. Literature emphasizes the need to research more factors related to this phenomenon. Peer violence is closely related to the environment in which the child or adolescent lives and which surrounds him/her (family, school) and the personality characteristics of the bully and the victim. The effect of dysfunctional family life and negative parenting behaviours in raising a child are significant factor for the child's violent behaviour at school. Peer violence can be a reaction to school ethos, values, and school climate. Personal characteristics of the individual also play an important role in peer violence.

Due to the actuality of this problem in recent decades, several programs for its prevention have been created in the world, but this paper covers several of them. Violence prevention program in schools focus in multiple factors,

primarily psychological factors (emotional, cognitive, and behavioural). Some of the programs are specifically aimed at reducing violence in schools, while others have broader goals in the *context* of reducing violence. The results that talk about the success of programs for the prevention of peer violence show that they increase awareness and knowledge about dealing with violence and to a large extent affect its reduction (Olweus & Limber, 2010). For example, in the research on the effectiveness of the KiVa program in Finland, it was found that in schools in which this program was used (experimental schools) compared to schools in which it was not used (control schools), the peer violence was reduced about 20-30% (Smit, 2019). That is, the interventions reduced the number of victims and bullies, while empathy towards victims increased significantly. These results are encouraging and provide a basis for implementing violence preventing programs in schools in our country.

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