

BULLYING IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT - FROM IGNORING TO IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS

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Abstract. *The statistics show how big the problem of bullying is globally and in Romania, but a high number of the people who should stop this phenomenon exhibit an attitude of ignorance and sometimes denial. The research objectives of the present study aim to analyze the phenomenon of bullying in the school environment, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to identify the decisive prevention and intervention measures undertaken in school institutions that have contributed to the reduction or eradication of the phenomenon. Two qualitative research methods were used: the analysis of the relevant documents identified based on the analysis of the literature and the comparative analysis of the research results identified in the field. The main results of the analysis reflect the fact that at the global and national level, in the school environment the phenomenon of bullying has expanded in a worrying way, its effects repercussions on the social stakeholders involved in the educational environment, highlighting acts of violence in various forms, more serious or lighter, such as hitting, striking, tagging, humiliating or mocking verbal aggression, threatening with beating, extreme violence, delinquency, up to suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior on the part of the victims. The conclusion highlight that this phenomenon constitutes a challenge for decision-makers in school institutions, which, associated with the tendency to ignore or not recognize this problem, generates dysfunctions in identifying viable solutions that lead to the prevention, reduction or eradication of the phenomenon of bullying in the school environment.*

Keywords: bullying, school, prevention, intervention, ignoring.

1. Introduction

Bullying is defined as "hostile/excluding and derisive humiliating behavior... A child is labeled, teased, mocked in his circle of acquaintances or by peers who call him a certain way (referring to physical appearance or medical/family problems). Sometimes these teasings turn into fights or even, in certain cases, physical attacks (Costescu, 2019). Bullying involves an aggressive behavior which may take many forms as defined from various perspectives on interactions with others, perception, behaviorism, type of education (Filip, Popp and Andrioni, 2021:187).

Representatives of the authorities, teachers, school principals and, in general, decision-makers in Romania prefer to declare that bullying does not exist as a phenomenon, rather than making efforts to combat it in Romanian schools. While in other countries there is a major concern for studying and combating bullying, in Romania we have statistics of violence in schools, but very few preventive measures, which mainly involve education in the sense of combating bullying.

One of the studies carried out at the national level on bullying is by the NGO „Salvați Copiii” ("Save the Children"), from 2016 (Grădinaru, Stănculescu and Manole, 2016). This NGO, together with UNICEF and other non-governmental organizations, make substantial efforts to combat bullying in schools, while the decision-makers ignore it or do not recognize it as a phenomenon, so that the sociological measurements and the strategy for stopping the phenomenon are hampered by the approach to the subject by those who should stop it.

While Romania ignores bullying in schools, cyberbullying is also developing with maximum speed, which also requires a lot of measures to combat the new phenomenon that

mainly affects children and adolescents, being related in many cases with the school environment. In the other European countries, but also in the USA, Canada and Australia, this new phenomenon was intensively studied after the year 2000.

In Moldova Republic there is a much bigger interest for this phenomenon in the last years and also teachers and authorities seem to know better what bullying is and how to fight against it. In 2021, UNICEF Moldova funded a study and a practical guide for teachers, named „Stop Bullyng in School!” (Petrică, 2021), which contains the clear definition of the phenomenon called bullying, updated and adapted to the school environment, so that the signs of its existence to be well understood by teachers and decision-makers in schools, in order to be able to apply methods to combat and stop this phenomenon. This should happen also in the romanian schools, because the consequences of this phenomenon are reflected in the big number of violence cases which appears in the national statistics every year and the violent behavior is encreasing. One of the most terrible cases is that of a 14-year-old boy who visited his sister at school, to take her the food package received from the national "Milk and Corn" program, in March 2016, but was stoned to death by a group of children. Until that moment, the boy had been the victim of bullying, but no one had reported it. Even after the boy died, no explanation was found, with the authorities considering the terrible deed just "innocent play with dire consequences" (Adevărul, 2017). Such behaviors are, however, often encountered in the school environment in Romania, and the step from bullying to extreme violence is often made very easily.

2. The perception of bullying. Analysis of the literature

The study made by the NGO „Salvați Copiii” („Save the Children”) in 2016 shows that many of the children in Romania do not know what bulling means. „less than half of those who participated in the research had heard of the term "bullying" (48% of children answered yes), while 52% said they had not heard or did not know the term. Of those who say they heard, 35% did so on the Internet, 30% on TV, 24% on English class, and 13% in conducting class. Referring to what they understand by bullying, most of those who have heard of the term say that it is a form of aggression, physical or verbal (25%), mocking or humiliating (14%) or bullying (13%).” (Grădinaru, 2016: 29). The same study shows that 73% of children state that they witnessed a bullying situation in their school; 58% of the children state that they witnessed a bullying situation in their class; 69% of children state that they witnessed a bullying situation in the online environment; 46% of the children state that they witnessed a bullying situation in the group of friends. Also, about the physical violence and/or destruction of property, sthe study shows that 13% of children stated that they happened to destroy another child's things; 16% of children stated that they repeatedly hit another child, and 30% of children that they repeatedly lightly hit a colleague; 32% of children say they have been pushed or pushed by other children, repeatedly; 39% of children say that they were slightly injured and 16% that they were repeatedly beaten at school. „In the peer group, 78% of the children state that they have witnessed a mild aggression (pushing or light hitting) but repeated; 69% of children say they witnessed a fight between Two children. In the school environment, 73% of children state that they witnessed a bullying situation” (Grădinaru, Stănculescu and Manole, 2016: 52).

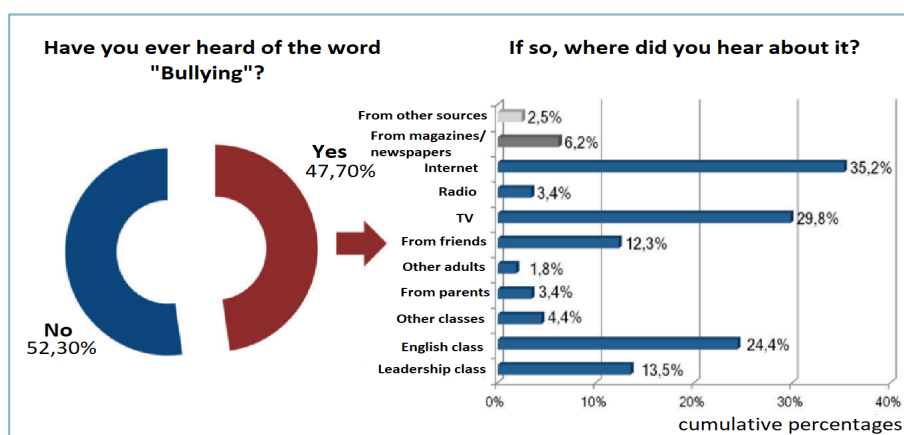
The most serious is the situation in relation to the threat of physical violence and/or humiliation, according to the same study: „19% of children say they have repeatedly humiliated another child at school; 22% of children say that they threatened to hit another child; 29% of children were threatened with hitting or beating; 24% of children were humiliated or shamed in the peer group; Rumors were spread about 37% of children; 84% of children state that they witnessed a situation in which one child threatens another; 80% of children state that they have witnessed a situation in which a child is humiliated by another child” (Idem). This kind of situations shows the link between bullying and killing other children in school, as it happened with the boy stoned to death by the other children, in the school yard, in Argeș county, in March 2016, the same year when the study of „Salvați Copiii” („Save the children”) was made. The NGO

has collected data during the period of May 30 - June 10, 2022, from approximately 400 schools in Romania, to be able to analyze the evolution of the phenomenon. In 2022, „Salvați Copiii” have released another research about bullying which shows that 82% of the students witnessed bullying situations in the school where they study, 73% in the class where they study, and 45% in the group of friends. But there are still no accurate data and certain actions made by the Romanian authorities for stopping the bullying phenomenon.

Asked if they have heard of the term "bullying", 48% of children say yes, while 52% say they have not / they don't know the term. Of those who say they heard, 35% did so from the Internet, 30% from TV, 24% from the English class, and 13% in leadership class. Referring to what they understand by bullying, most of those who have heard of the term say that it is a form of aggression, physical or verbal (25%), mocking or humiliating (14%) or bullying (13%)” (Grădinaru, Stănculescu, Manole, 2016: 29) (Figure 1). However, in a country like Romania, where many cases of bullying lead to extreme violence, the Government should do much more to stop this phenomenon. The local authorities should cooperate at least with the NGOs and the researchers, to find solutions to at least help the children understand what bullying means and how harmful it is.

The understanding of the term and phenomenon is necessary as a first step for the children in the comprehensive process. For this, we should have in Romania a much greater concern and involvement from local authorities and school decision-makers for this phenomenon.

Figure 1. The source of information about bullying



Source: Grădinaru et al., 2016:29

Many studies have been made about bullying and its consequences, in the last 20 years, in many of the countries all over the world. A study from 1995 shows that „that victims of bullying may lack skills in emotional regulation, a process which facilitates coping with provocative situations to lessen the stress of negative emotions” (Cicchetti, Ackerman, Izard, 1995: 1). Starting from this definition, a study from 2000 in the USA had examined the emotional regulation and display patterns of victims during classroom bullying episodes. The conclusion was that: „Children in grades one through six were observed during free play in the winter and spring of three consecutive school years. Results of the study indicated that the coping styles observed in victims of bullying can be grouped into two distinct clusters: 1) problem-solving strategies that are associated with the de-escalation and resolution of bullying episodes; and 2) aggressive strategies that tend to perpetuate and escalate the bullying interaction. Parallels were found between victims’ and bullies’ emotional displays. Results are discussed in the context of how maladaptive emotional regulation processes may act as risk factors for chronic victimization” (Wilton, Craig, Peper, 2000: 226).

One of the biggest problems of bullying is ignorance or sometimes denial. A study from 2003, „She is not actually bullied. The discourse of harassment in student groups”, shows how in many situations, the victims are ignored by the group and the authorities as well, because of the mentalities of the particular regions of the world. „Bullying is a considerable problem in schools. It has various negative effects on the children involved. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how children themselves interpret and construct bullying. Three elementary school classes with a high number of victim nominations were chosen among the 48 classes taking part in a larger study. The pupils from selected classes were interviewed in small groups. (...) The results suggest that bullying can be construed as unproblematic and justified among children. For example, the ‘interpretative repertoire of underestimation’ constructs bullying as a game or some other harmless action, the ‘odd student repertoire’ describes the victim as a negatively deviant student who cannot behave as he/she should and the ‘interpretative repertoire of deserving’ constructs meaningful reasons for hostility towards the victim” (Teräsahjo, Salmivalli, 2003: 134).

Also in 2003, Sarah Woods (University of Hertfordshire) and Dieter Wolke (University of Bristol) from UK tried to answer to the question: „Does the Content of Anti-Bullying Policies Inform us About the Prevalence of Direct and Relational Bullying Behaviour in Primary Schools?": „A total of 2377 children in primary schools (six year olds/year two: 1072; eight year olds/year four: 1305) were individually interviewed using a standard interview about bullying experiences. A detailed content analysis scheme that closely followed the core whole-school intervention approach was carried out on a total of 34 schools: 24.5% of the children reported being directly victimised very frequently and 45.9% reported being relationally victimised frequently or very frequently. No correlation between the content and quality of anti-bullying policies and the prevalence of direct bullying behaviour was found. Conversely, an inverse relationship was found for relational bullying behaviour: schools with the most detailed and comprehensive anti-bullying policies had a higher incidence of relational bullying and victimisation behaviour. Inspection of school anti-bullying policies per se provides little guide to the actual amount of direct bullying behaviour in schools” (Wolke, 2003). Also, violence against children “has long-term effects and is generated by a multitude of factors: financial, social, psychological, emotional factors. In order to prevent this phenomenon, the intervention of the authorities is also needed by adopting effective laws to protect victims of domestic violence” (Filip, Popp and Androni, 2020:311).

A study from 2006 presents the results of a phenomenological study with elementary school children identified as bullies or victims. The Results of the study indicate that bullies seemed to hold a positive regard of themselves despite their negative behaviors. They even acknowledged and understood their bullying behaviors. They blamed their victims and felt empowered by their actions toward someone that they perceived as weaker. Victims, on the other hand, internalized their problems and often blamed themselves for the bullying. These victims suffered a low self-esteem and often used strategies to avoid bullies and their inappropriate behaviors. In examining the various aspects of the complicated nature of bullying and bullying behaviors, a phenomenological approach was used” (Omizo et al., 2006: 89).

In addition to the danger of violence, up to murder, on the background of bullying, there is a high degree of danger of suicide of victims of bullying, as shows a recent study, carried out in 2020, based on the analysis of teenagers in the school environment in 83 countries (Tang et al, 2020). The school system should be able to stop this phenomenon with the help of psychologists, as shows a study from 2004 (Reid, Monsen, Rivers, 2004), but neither this problem could be solved in Romania. Many of the studies tried to answer to the most important questions about this phenomenon: „Why do some children bully at school?” (Rigby, 2005) as a study made in the Australian schools.

3. Research methodology

The research objectives of the present study aim to analyze the bullying phenomenon in the school environment, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to identify the decisive prevention and intervention measures undertaken in school institutions that have contributed to the reduction or eradication of the phenomenon.

Two qualitative research methods were used: the analysis of the relevant documents identified based on the analysis of the literature and the comparative analysis of the research results identified in the field.

The analysis started from the following research questions: 1) How is the bullying phenomenon perceived in the school environment?; 2) What are the solutions and intervention measures in case of the existence of the bullying phenomenon?

4. Analysis and interpretation

4.1. From bullying to extreme violence and delinquency

Based on the analysis of the documents studied and the comparative analysis of the research results in the field, it is found that the same type of problems are common to all countries. To deny and to ignore the victims of bullying encourages especially aggressive behavior and violence in the school environment, accentuating the recidivism of juvenile delinquency. The majority of the answers were linked with the problems from home that the aggressive children have, as a recent study about the juvenile delinquency in Romania shows (Otovescu, 2021): „According to statistical data published by the Public Ministry², in 2019 there were 3,850 minors prosecuted for criminal acts, increasing by 146 in comparison with the previous year, but less than in 2016 and 2017, when there were registered 3,883, respectively 3,882 criminal cases of juvenile delinquents. In 2016, there was an increase in the number of juveniles prosecuted in the previous year (3,548), but also compared to 2014, when there were 2,966 criminal cases which implied juvenile offenders. The increase of 884 cases in 2019 in comparison with 2014 is a bad sign, especially because the statistics also show an increase in the number of criminal acts committed with violence (rape and robbery), as well as an increase in the number of juveniles arrested. Thus, in 2019 there were 76 rapes committed by minors, in comparison with 66 in 2014, respectively 616 robberies, in comparison with 611 in 2014, being pre-trial detained 460 minors in 2019, in comparison with 371 in 2014. The pre-trial detention is a measure ordered if the person presents a high degree of social danger. During the same period, there was a decrease in the number of thefts committed by minors, from 1,496 to 1,369, which shows, however, that an important number of non-violent crimes have become violent crimes” (Otovescu, Creac, 2021: 154-155).

In 2004, the researchers from the University of Turku, Finland, studied the substratum of this kind of violent behavior of children, by the „Connections between attitudes, group norms, and behaviour in bullying situations” (Salmivalli, Voeten, 2004), one of their observations being that „Most students believe that bullying is wrong, and they think that one should try to help the victims. Nevertheless, most students do not express their disapproval to peers who bully, and actually do nothing to intervene or support the victim” (Salmivalli, Voeten, 2004: 247).

A study made in 2000 by a team of psychiatrists reveals that: „Bullying or its effects do not seem to be a distinguishing factor among those admitted to an adolescent unit. In the outpatient group, however, being bullied is frequently a factor in the presentation of adolescents to psychiatric services, with depression being the diagnosis in over 70% of cases. In contrast, bullies and bully/victims were most likely to present with conduct disorders, which were frequently co-morbid with hyperkinetic disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)” (Salmon et al., 2000: 563).

4.2 Suicidal behavioral risks of bullying victims

The victims of bullying can be injured and killed by their aggressors, but also can commit suicide. A recent study from 2020 analyses the „Global risks of suicidal behaviours (SB) and

being bullied as well as their association among adolescents have been poorly understood.”, aiming „to determine the risks of suicidal ideation (SI), suicide planning (SP), suicide attempt (SA) and being bullied in adolescents and their related associations across gender, countries and different WHO regions” (Tang et al, 2020: 1). The study „examined the data of Global School-based Health Survey of 1st Jan 2003 to 31st Dec 2014 from 83 countries and demonstrated that the global risk of SI in adolescents was 16,5%, SP 16,5%, SA 16,4%, and of being bullied 35,3% respectively. The risk of SB varied across WHO regions and the highest risk of suicidal behaviours was in Africa (SI 19,9%, SP 23,2%, SA 20,8%). Girls had a significant higher risk of SI and SP than boys. There were significant associations of being bullied with SI, SP and SA in boys and girls, and the association with SA was stronger in boys than girls. The association of being bullied with SB also showed regional variations; the strongest association for SI was found in Southern Asia, and for SP and SA were found in Western Pacific” (Idem: 2). „Findings from this study suggested that the association of being bullied with SA was stronger than on SI and SP. Given that being bullied increases the risk of mental health problem that lead to increased risk of SI, SP and SA, it might be that being bullied could contribute to poor impulse control among adolescents, which is the strongest predictors for SA. However, impact of being bullied on impulse control cannot be estimated as impulsivity was not measured in GSHS, which could be an area for future investigation” (Ibidem: 10).

To diminish the suicidal behavior, there must be solutions for the children and teenagers affected by bullying, but the Romanian Government does not have this kind of programs and not even studies about the complexity of the phenomenon. In this field, also the NGOs are the only ones to try to apply solutions.

The most recent study made in Romania, in 2022, by the NGO 'Save the Children Romania', analyses data centralized following the online consultation of children in June 2022. The analysis show that 82% of students have witnessed bullying situations in the school where they study, 73% in the class where they study, and in the group of friends 45%. „The psycho-emotional impact is all the stronger, as the children emerged vulnerable from the two years of the pandemic: one in three children faced anxiety states and needed counseling and psycho-emotional support, the percentage rising to over 50 % in the case of teenagers, leading to extremely serious consequences, namely suicide attempts” (Save the Children Romania, Press Release, June 2022). A good solution found by the NGO is the „Health Camp” organized every summer. This year, the camp welcomed 100 children and young people from Romania, to learn how to manage their anxiety or other strong emotions and how they can have better relationships with those around them.

4.3. Social and educational response measures in reducing the phenomenon of bullying

The US Department of education have a great concern about the evolution of this phenomenon and the actions in the USA schools could be a good model for the Romanian authorities and school principals. In a report from 2011, „Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies”, we can find a chapter dedicated to the „Analysis of State Bullying Legislation” for all the states of USA. From 2011 they were already preoccupied of cyberbullying, also: „The law states that bullying is prohibited at any location, activity, or function that is not school-related, or using technology or devices that are not owned by the school, (...) For purposes of the analysis, legislation was rated as more expansive if it grants schools jurisdiction over both on-campus and off-campus bullying or cyberbullying behavior” (Stuart-Cassell, Bell, Springer, 2011: 24). They have made an analysis of the history of the phenomenon in the USA and also of the evolution in every state, based on the modifications in the law field, comparing the results: „Most bullying laws do conform to research-based definitions by emphasizing the intentional nature of bullying behavior and the harms inflicted on targeted victims. Exhibit 8 reports the language commonly found in state legislation that identifies the impacts of bullying on victims. State laws most frequently define bullying as acts imposing 'general harms', 'threats of fear of

harm', 'physical harm' or 'property damage'. Less frequently laws described acts that 'disrupt the school setting', 'interfere with learning', or 'cause psychological harm'" (Idem: 26).

Even if democratic countries are tolerant with many kinds of behavior, in the United States of America we can find solutions in order to apply „zero tolerance” for violence. A study from 2003, from Virginia, reveals how works the legislation in the school environment from the USA, protecting children in front of extreme violence. „The federal government, through the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA), required states to enact zero tolerance legislation mandating school districts to expel students automatically for a period of one year if they brought weapons to school. Under threat of losing federal education dollars, states complied. In turn, school districts developed disciplinary policies that reflected state mandates. In Virginia, as in other states, concern has mounted that application of these policies sometimes results in inequitable and nonsensical treatment of children” (Sughrue, 2003: 238), analysing the evolution of zero tolerance policies violence and guns to the school district level, utilizing Virginia as an example for the emergent case law. This can be taken as model, as well, for other situations, as legislation that can be made to reduce bullying in schools.

There is a big concern about bullying also in the United Kingdom and the researchers recommends a personalized approach for each individual situation, there is no single recommendation or that can be applied in a unitary manner. „Schools in the UK are required by law to have a behaviour/school management policy, within which they are required to make reference to bullying in terms of promoting respect for others and intolerance of bullying and harassment. Schools also have a duty to state clearly what their position is regarding anti-bullying initiatives (School Standards Framework Act, 1998). However, apart from guidelines there are no universal policies that need to be implemented” (Woods, Wolke, 2003: 382). But the examples of success can be analyzed and taken into account for a country strategy.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusions of the study highlight the fact that anti-bullying prevention actions are important in the prevention of school violence, and ignoring and denying bullying in the school environment leads to the extension of the negative effects of this phenomenon on the victims, on the one hand, and on the other hand the knowledge and the awareness of the phenomenon leads to the use of models of good resolution practices and the application of intervention measures that contribute to the reduction and eradication of this phenomenon.

From all the studies carried throughout the world, in the past 30 years there has been a constant concern for knowing and reducing the phenomenon of bullying in many countries, despite the fact that we witness an attitude of ignorance and denial of the phenomenon among the general population, as well as at the level of stakeholders in the school environment. Based on the specialized studies analyzed and on the basis of the comparative analysis of the research results, it is found that there is an increasing trend of aggressive behaviors at the global and national level in society, but also in the school environment, and thus this phenomenon of bullying can lead to actions of extreme violence, delinquency, risks of suicidal ideation, suicidal behavioral risks of bullying victims or other associated risks.

Due to the fact that the prevention segment of aggressive behaviors leads to the prevention of violent actions in schools, the need to inform and raise the awareness of the population and social stakeholders involved in the school environment on the phenomenon and connotations of bullying is a priority. Along with the prevention segment, the intervention segment in the case of actions of abuse, harassment, intimidation, is imperatively necessary in order to reduce or eradicate the phenomenon of school bullying. At the level of schools in Romania, the first step of the Romanian authorities must be to stop ignoring and denying the existence of bullying. The second step must be the understanding of the situation. Other necessary steps must be the collaboration with the researchers and the NGOs, in order to find solutions and apply them, with the purpose to create good Bullying laws and policies and to apply them in school environment.

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