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BULLYING IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The bullying phenomenon is a reality of the current Romanian school, insufficiently aware by teachers, students and parents alike, both as forms of manifestation and as effects. Numerous studies conducted in the European Union area highlight the tendency of bullying to spread and grow in intensity, a phenomenon with negative impact not only on school life but also on personal and social development. For this reason, in recent years, there has been a constant concern at European level to develop anti-bullying policies and strategies and to identify good practices in this regard, that can be disseminated to prevent and combat bullying. In Romania, efforts are still being made to raise awareness of what bullying is and what its consequences are, the concrete steps in the form of prevention programs, anti-bullying intervention strategies, appropriate educational tools are almost non-existent. Referring to this undesirable reality of the Romanian school, we aim, through an investigative approach, to analyze the extent to which pre-university education teachers are aware of this phenomenon and promptly identify some of its forms of manifestation. The study circumscribes a quantitative approach, conducted through the questionnaire survey, and a qualitative approach, materialized in the organization of focus groups with teachers included in the research sample.
Keywords: bullying; socio-emotional competences; educational relations; anti-bullying policies; anti-bullying strategies;

1. INTRODUCTION

A careful radiography of the world in which we live highlights, beyond changes that have a positive impact on people's lives, a number of changes which must be alarming for us. The crises that we cross - from moral-spiritual to economic ones, intra- and interethnic, interreligious conflicts, aggressiveness and hostility increasingly more present in the behavior of many people - regardless of their social position - outline a picture of a secularized society, marked by a strong dissolution of values, a society in which man is more and more lonely, having an acute sense of alienation, not only in relation to alterity, but also in relation to his own self. Adapting to such a world, the appropriate response to

aggression, violence, bullying, conflict, selfishness, call for increased attention, from the earliest age, to the formation / development of socio-emotional competences.

It is obvious that the school fully reflects these peculiarities, unfortunately negative, of the societal ensemble of which it is a component part. The psychological traits of the child who is, today, student are altered mainly because of their exposure to a number of harmful stimuli with toxic effects on their personality. Modern technologies are not only ways of facilitating communication, information, adaptation, etc., but they often prove to be tools for spreading aggression, hatred, intolerance, xenophobia, etc. In this context, we find, as a general effect, a beginning of dehumanization: our children are more impulsive, more irritable and more aggressive, appealing to physical or verbal violence to solve their problems at school or outside school. Of course, the etiology of these transformations in their personality is a complex one, but we appreciate that beyond the technology that invaded their life and "robotized" somewhat, "amputate", first of all, their ability to feel, to empathize, two are the causes that deeply affect the child in his first years of school: an insecure affective family environment and a school environment marked by a lack of an emotional support of educators, which are focused on the instructional process and concerned, sometimes exclusively, by the intellectual development of the students.

Cantoning in the formal area of education, a phenomenon already characteristic of Romanian schools is bullying. In a sociological study at national level, entitled *Bullying among children*, made by the *Save the Children* Organization in 2016, it appears that "in the school environment, 73% of children say they have experienced a bullying situation between equals at the level of school and 58% at the level of their class "(Grădinaru, Stănculeanu, Manole, 2016, p. 53).

Data on Romania in the OMS report - *Growing up unequal: gender and socio-economic differences in young people's health and well-being. Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (Hbsc) Study: International Report From the 2013/2014 Survey*, which is based on the collection of information from 42 countries in Europe and North America, is presented as follows: the prevalence of bullying among children with 11 years - is 9% for girls and 17% for boys, who admit that they have aggressed other children at least two or three times a month in the last two months, placing us as a country on the fifth place out of 42. At the following ages the prevalence increases, so that at 13 years, 14% of girls and 23% of boys recognize their "aggressor status" (third position), and at 15 years, 10% of girls and 23% of boys experienced bullying as aggressors (fifth position) (2016, pp. 202-203).

A report presenting the situation of bullying in USA schools, conducted in 2014, states that it affects a large number of children in all age groups, but its prevalence can be seen in students in third grades and fourth, in which case about 22% report that they are harassed 2-3 times a month or more (Luxenberg, Limber, Olweus, 2015, p. 21). And this is happening in schools where anti-bullying programs are not yet implemented, one of the most famous program, given the results, being the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*.

In the conditions in which we want secure schools, schools where well-being can become a reality shared by both students and teachers, the first thing we need to do to achieve these goals is to identify the ways in which we can prevent / diminish / combat bullying. This is because the security, the safety of students and teachers, the state of well-being can only exist where any form of violence, aggression or implicitly bullying, has been eradicated. The first step in this direction is, of course, the awareness of the phenomenon and its effects on the personal and social level.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The literature addressing to bullying is not a consistent one, especially if we relate to studies investigating this phenomenon in the Romanian school environment.

The one who has demonstrated a constant concern for the analysis of this phenomenon, for the delimitation of the characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of aggression, and the identification of adequate educational intervention strategies to prevent or combat it, was Olweus D., considered, in fact, the "parent" of the *bullying* concept. In his work, we find the following definition of bullying: "I define bullying or victimization in the following general way: A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative action on the part of one or more other students "(Olweus, 1986 and 1991, apud Olweus, 2013).

In the same author's view, bullying, a sub-category of aggression or aggressive behavior, is defined by reference to three criteria:"(1) It is aggressive behavior or intentional "harm doing" (2) which is carried out "repeatdly and over time" (3) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power" (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano and Slee, 1999, p. 11).

From the analysis of the studies focused on this topic, we have identified a variety of behaviors associated with bullying. Remaining within the limits of Rigby's classification, bullying behaviors can take the following forms:

a) Physical - hitting, pushing, snapping, pinching, constraint by physical contact, personal property/goods destruction, theft, etc .;

b) Psychological - threats, teasing, labeling, insults, blackmail, nicknaming, spreading rumors and lies, humiliation, mockery, defamation, manifestation of contempt, threatening gestures, deliberate exclusion of someone from a group or activity, manipulation, intimidation, etc. (Olweus, 1999; 2013; Rigby, 2007; Saliceti, 2015).

Referring to students involved in bullying, whether as aggressors or as victims, we can outline the following psycho-behavioral picture (Olweus, 1994; Rigby, 2007; Saliceti, 2015):

- The *bully*: person (or group of persons) who attempts to dominate through violence and abuse - verbal and physical; is impulsive, slightly irritable, aggressive; has no regrets or ability to empathize or has an extremely low level of empathy; has deficiency of attention and oversized self-esteem, sometimes; does not comply with the rules, is not cooperative, being generally antisocial; may have an inappropriate entourage;

- The *victim*: person (or group of persons) who supports violence, abuse; is unable to defend himself; is often excluded from the group of colleagues, being socially isolated; is characterized by exacerbated sensitivity, shyness, insecurity, anxiety, low self-esteem, introversion, low sociability, passivity to aggression, lack of initiative in communication / argumentation, non-assertiveness. But they can also be challenging victims, where anxiety combines with aggressive reactions.

What we need to highlight, in order to understand, once more, the gravity of the phenomenon is that bullying leaves "traces" not only in the lives and health of those involved, in their school performance, but affects public health, the health of the society in which we live.

Rigby (2003, 2007) and Olweus (1994, 2013) warn about the adverse effects of bullying at the psychological and physical levels, in the context of school and personal life. Thus, bullying can lead to reduced physical and mental health of children, decreased self-esteem, decreased ability to concentrate, lead to frustration, sadness, anger, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts. Also, relatively low levels of well-being, low social adaptability, a tendency to isolation or a tendency to aggression, absenteeism, aversion to school, and damage of the emotional and social development are other consequences that victims of bullying suffer. The more worrying is the fact that some of these can also be kept in adulthood (for example, low self-esteem).

From the aggressors` perspective, delinquency, depression, stabilization of aggressive, antisocial behavior are among the most common "outcomes" of bullying, in which they are the main actors.

Given the damaging nature of this phenomenon, it is normal for it to be treated as a major public health problem, and the intervention to prevent / combat it primarily concerns the school environment. Teachers are the ones who, capitalizing their own emotional competences and focusing on the educational climate, on developed relationships among students, can first provide the necessary support to both to the aggressive students and to the victim students in an attempt to prevent future bullying.

Combating the phenomenon requires action at the educational system level based on effective anti-bullying policies that circumscribe optimal intervention measures on three levels:

- teacher` training;
- parents` education;
- formative approaches for students.

Anti-bullying strategies promoted at every level should firstly raise awareness of the existence and severity of the consequences of bullying for children's health, among the main partners involved in the educational act: teachers, parents and students. Also, given the correlation between aggression and the lack of socio-emotional competences, another priority goal should be to develop socio-emotional competences such as: effective identification, management and regulation of negative emotions, empathy, sociability, as well as active listening, assertive communication, negotiation and conflict management

skills. These aspects can be considered the common denominator of intervention programs, which can be personalized according to the target group: teachers, parents and students.

The present study aims to investigate the extent to which teachers are aware of the presence of bullying in school, all the more as the tendency is to deny, minimize the phenomenon and its sometimes devastating effects, or to confuse it with aggression or aggressive behaviors that students develop in their relationships, often.

"Schools - the *Bullying among children* study shows - do not have a common approach to cases of bullying; some teachers are more involved in stopping violent behavior, while others remain passive ("what matters if the teacher cares"). Some children have mentioned that there are situations where some teachers encourage bullying or aggressors (constantly humiliating some children) (Grădinaru, Stănculeanu, Manole, 2016, p. 54).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main questions of the research approach described in the present study are:
- *To what extent are teachers in pre-university education aware of the existence of bullying in school?*
- *To what extent can teachers identify some forms of manifestations of bullying?*

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the investigative approach is to identify the perception and attitude of the pre-university education teachers towards the phenomenon called bullying, focusing on the extent to which the teachers are aware by its existence.

Also, a secondary goal of the micro-research carried out was to emphasize the need to optimize the professional training for the teaching career by introducing modules / disciplines centered on the formation / development of the socio-emotional abilities of the teachers.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

The methodological options were "dictated" by the aim and objectives proposed, while ensuring the harmonization of the quantitative approach - which shape an objective picture of the extent to which the teachers know and identify the phenomenon of bullying –with the qualitative one - focused on highlighting personal perspective, marked, of course, by the subjectivity of each of the questioned subjects.

The valued research methods, circumscribed to each of these approaches, were the survey based on the questionnaire and the focus group.

The elaborated and implemented questionnaire was a scale type one, which included a total of 25 closed-ended items, the answers being distributed on a five-step Likert scale, from *to a very large extent* to *a very small extent*. The 25 items of the scale were distributed in three broad categories: the first refers to *forms of bullying* in the classroom, the second category followed *the consequences of bullying*, and the third category focused on *strategies for prevention and combating the phenomenon of bullying*.

The investigated population consisted of 116 teachers, 96 (82%) female and 20 (18%) male, with ages from 28 to 57, from pre-university education, from Dâmbovița, Giurgiu and Prahova counties.

From the 116 teachers, a total of 20 persons also participated in focus group discussions. Their selection was made in such a way as to ensure the homogeneity of the discussion group, as well as the representativeness in relation to the rural or urban environment in which the school operates, the years of experience in school, respectively the didactic degrees obtained.

The information gathered through the questionnaire and the focus-group, appropriately processed, led to a series of interpretations that are the subject of the next section of the study.

6. FINDINGS

For the present study we chose to present the results achieved by the questionnaires, referring to the first category of items, the one focused on the forms of manifestation of bullying at the level of classroom.

This first category was composed of five relevant items.

The first item asked teachers to appreciate the extent to which they are confronted in the classroom with the situation where some students ask colleagues to isolate a child. This item refers to one of the forms of manifestation of psychological bullying.
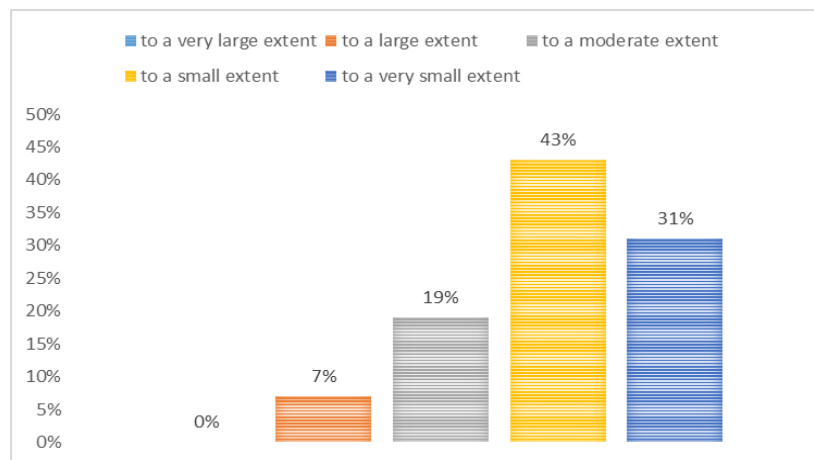

Figure 1. Teacher's opinion on isolation - as a form of bullying

The results for this item (Figure 1) show that, in the perceptions of teachers, this situation is present only *to a small extent* (43%) or *to a very small extent* (31%). Only a small percentage of respondents believe that this situation is the one they are facing *to a moderate extent* (19%) or *to a large extent* (7%).

Analyzing the answers for this item, it is easy to see that the situation in which some students ask colleagues to isolate a child is perceived (possibly erroneously) as a rare one. We can confront here the situation where teachers either do not have a sufficiently close educational relations with their students, so that they can quickly grasp such situations or to be brought to their knowledge of such problems, whether they know the school reality, but due to the fact that they are not sufficiently instructed to handle such a form of bullying, it denies it.

The second item is related to the teacher's opinion on the extent to which, at the classroom level, there are situations in which students humiliate / mock the other colleagues, repeatedly. Humiliation / mockery is another form of psychological bullying.
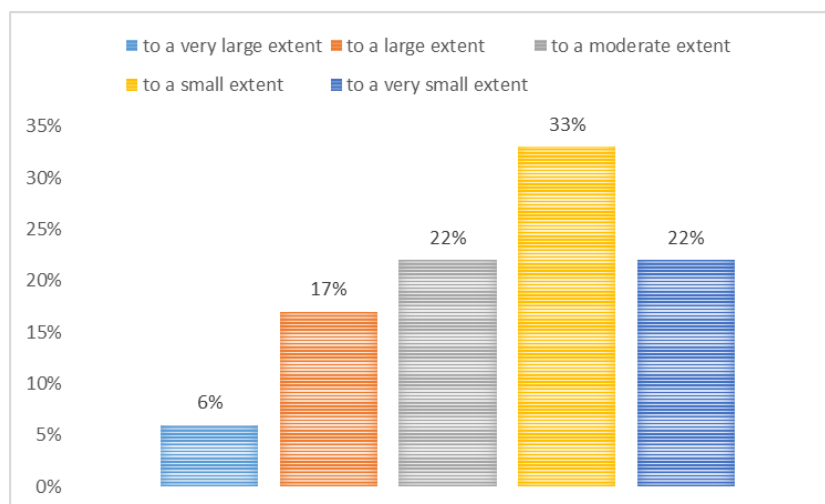

Figure 2. Teacher's opinion on humiliation / mockery - as a form of bullying

The analysis of the results obtained for this item (Figure 2) reveals the following distribution of responses: 6% of the respondents consider that they are confronted with this situation *to a very large extent*, 17% *to a large extent*, 22% *to a moderate extent*, 33% *to a small extent* and 22% *to a very small extent*. The distribution of responses is balanced on this item, which may lead us to the conclusion that there is a significant percentage of teachers who are aware of the presence of humiliation / mockery as a form of psychological bullying at the classroom level. However, there is also a significant percentage of teachers (55%), who consider that such situations manifest *to a small extent* and *to a very small extent* at the level of classroom, contradicting the results of the researches presented in the previous subchapters of this study.

Another form of manifestation of bullying in the school environment is the threat through stealing / damaging belongings. Through the third item of the questionnaire, we intend to highlight the extent to which teachers face such a situation at the level of the students class they work with.
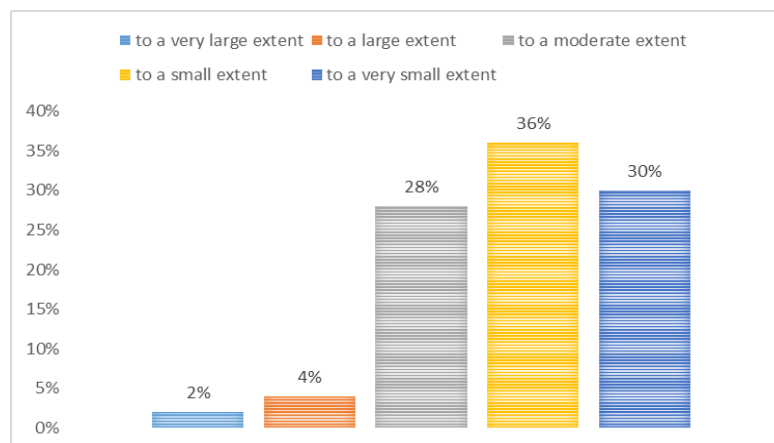

Figure 3. Teacher's opinion on stealing / damaging belongings - as a form of bullying

The responses provided in this item (Figure 3) are visibly distributed to the right part of the figure, which corresponds to the low levels of the Likert Scale, pointing out that respondents consider this situation to be present only *to a very small extent* (30%) and *to a small extent* (36%) at the level of classroom.

Only a small percentage of teachers say that they are confronted with this situation *to a very large extent* (2%) and *to a large extent* (4%) in their teaching activity.

The next item of the questionnaire was focused on identifying the extent to which respondents are confronted in their classroom with verbal aggression among students.
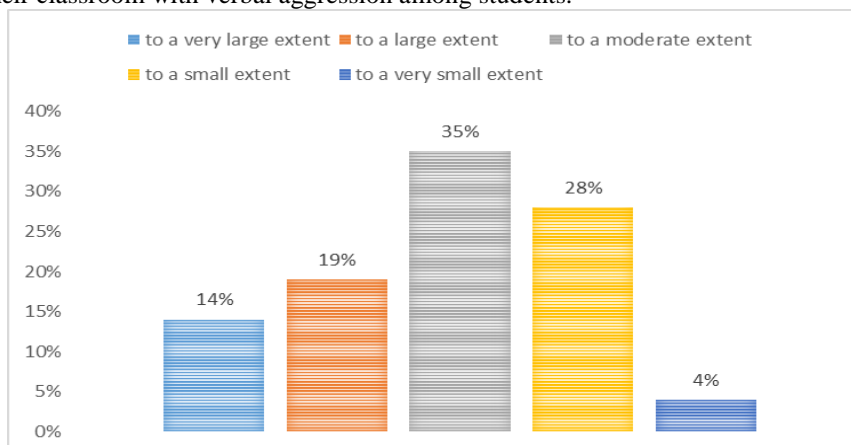

Figure 4. Teacher's opinion on verbal aggression - as a form of bullying

The data obtained, graphically represented in Figure 4, highlights the following situation: among the questioned teachers, 14% declare that they are confronted *to a very large extent* with the situation of verbal aggression among the students, 19% say that they are confronted *to a large extent* with this situation, 35% - *to a moderate extent*, 28% - *to a small extent* and 4% - *to a very small extent*.

Unlike the other forms of bullying investigated in this study, we find that verbal aggression among students is, according to the results, the most obvious and observed form of bullying by teachers. This can be explained by the fact that verbal aggression is an exteriorized form of bullying, extremely easy to identify in student-student relations, even during didactic activities.

Item 5 of the questionnaire focused on another important form of bullying, physical aggression among students.
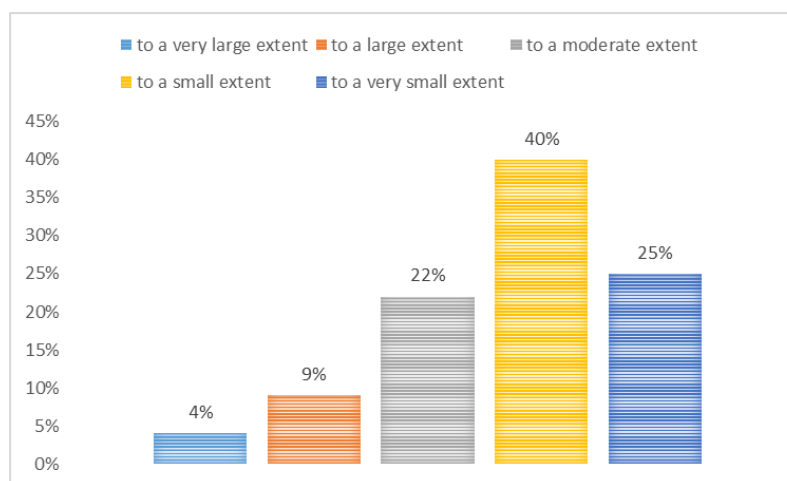

Figure 5. Teacher's opinion on physical aggression - a form of bullying

Figure 5 graphically present teachers' responses related to this type of bullying. Again, we find the distribution of responses preponderant in the low levels of Likert Scale: 25% of respondents say they are confronted to this situation *to a very small extent* and 40% *to a small extent*.

Corroborating the results obtained from the application of the questionnaire and those obtained through the focus groups, we can present the main ideas found:
- in general, the investigated teachers state that they only face to a very small extent, to a small extent or to a moderate extent (with low percentages) with the forms of manifestation of bullying in the classroom: situations where some students ask colleagues to isolate a child, some students humiliate / mocker other students, repeatedly, students who threaten other students by stealing / damaging belongings, students physically aggress other students;
- the only form of manifestation of bullying that respondents identify as a situation they are facing with, to a large extent and to a very large extent, is the verbal aggression among students.

7. CONCLUSION

By analyzing and interpreting the data obtained through our investigative approach, which was aimed at investigating the opinions of the teachers regarding the phenomenon of bullying, with an emphasis on its forms of manifestation, we can highlight some general conclusions.

The investigated teachers are only to a small extent aware of the presence and manifestation of the phenomenon of bullying in the collectives of students they work with. This situation may have as a possible cause the insufficient knowledge on the part of the teachers, of their students, the student-student relationships, the problems faced by each students or the class of students as a whole; a distant educational relationship between teacher and students, which can lead to a lack of access to some information and problem situations that may occur at the classroom level. Another cause could be due to the forms of manifestation of bullying, some of which being less visible, more hidden and developed,

usually manifested when students are not in the classroom with the teachers (for example when some students ask others to isolate a colleague, threats, destruction of goods).

The only form of bullying that teachers are aware of is verbal aggression among students, because it is very easy to observe even in didactic activities: during collective discussions or during the process of solving learning tasks on groups.

Of course, another strong assumption is shaped out here: the teachers are not sufficiently trained and do not have enough skills to adequately manage multiple bullying situations. Teachers denied the existence of this phenomenon or minimized the negative impact on students class level, on the educational relations level and on the proper development of each student, somehow masking the reality.

Concluding, we can say that the issue of bullying is no negligible at all, and denial and minimization of the phenomenon will not bring fundamental changes in the direction of its prevention / combating. Some of the solutions could come from the initial and continuing teachers` training, also focused on this dimension. Introducing some contents related to bullying in the themes of initial teacher education disciplines as well as courses / modules within continuous professional development programs can ensure the acquisition of solid knowledge about this phenomenon as well as the development of skills that enable teachers correct approach and effective management of bullying situations.

Also, the formation/development of teachers' socio-emotional competences should be one of the aims of any training program for them. An empathic teacher, a teacher who develops harmonious relationships with his students, who is concerned about their well-being, will certainly be more attentive to situations that "announce" the bullying and much more able to intervene in order to prevent or stop this phenomenon.

Acknowledgments

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