

SOME FEATURES OF BULLYING AT SCHOOL

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A number of different sources indicate that aggression, terror, hatred, violence and hostilities become more and more powerful in all areas of human life. Individual people and various organizations all over the world raise their voices in order to put an end to this phenomenon. The entire human society appears to have a direct or indirect opinion about the issue. The increasingly impatient search for a solution is permeated by a sense of fear, distrust and even impotence, leading to a general decline of optimism among individual people and communities.

In many countries it has been recognized that aggressive behaviour and its consequences primarily affect children and young people. International research findings and analyses suggest that aggressive behaviour, violent attitudes and various forms of harassment are present in the life of educational institutions, and the consequences are to be taken into consideration.

Considerable new information and experience have been gathered as a result of the research programs going on at the schools of the Scandinavian countries, the U.S.A., Japan, Canada, England, Italy and Germany. No comprehensive research program has been conducted in Hungary, so this is a neglected research subject at present. The selection of my research topic has partly been motivated by the related international literature available to me, and partly by my own experience collected during my work as a practising psychologist.

- In the first period I undertook collecting easily recognisable experience available directly from parents, schoolchildren and teachers at schools.
- As part of Phase 2, I made an attempt to carry out an experiment to reveal violence and bullying at selected schools. 505 schoolchildren participated in the experiment.

For constraints of space, the present study only aims at presenting daily experience and some of the phenomena revealed by the research. I am aware that my initiative might appear to insignificant, as compared to the immensity and complexity of the issue, but I hope that may contribute to starting a research into the problem at our schools, and our general knowledge about the topic increases.

A Research into Bullying in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County in Hungary

The research has been conducted in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, Hungary. The classes involved in the selected schools participated in the project with all their pupils. Not any special selection criteria was applied. In this way it was possible to work with average, "normal" communities.

The following groups were involved in the research: 10 fifth forms, 10 eighth forms (elementary school), and 6 groups living in care centres (state orphanages). The total number of schoolchildren was 505.

In the present partial study I wish to sum up the answers (research findings) received to the following questions:

- Are there pupils affected by bullying and if yes, what is their proportion in the entire community?
- Are there any significant differences in the most important indicators among the identifiable (separate) groups?

Self-report has been the most important data gathering research method. A special questionnaire has been applied to collect information about bullying. These methods have been complemented with observing the persons participating in the project in their natural environment (school and home).

In my research, bullying is identified as an aggressive behaviour that is repeated over an extended period of time, characteristic of one or more pupils domineering over one lonely and/or weak individual, and the activity does not have any obvious reason (non-reactive aggression).

In the course of my observations, I have acquired a great deal of new information about the inner world of the institutions (classes), the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils. In

possession of the research findings I am encouraged to assert that a very high number of patterns of violence, harassment and aggression is present among the pupils. The phenomena belonging to these categories affect in some form a much higher number of pupils than I had originally anticipated. The high degree of occurrence of such phenomena is illustrated by the data below:

Occurrence in the research population

(in a four-layer structural model)

Research population: 505 individuals

| No.: | Occurrence according to categories | Occurrence figures (individuals) | Distribution (%) |
|------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Identifiable categories | | |
| 1. | Victim | 132 | 26,4 |
| 2. | Attacker | 65 | 12,87 |
| 3. | Aggressive victim | 134 | 26,53 |
| 4. | Spectator | 174 | 34,46 |
| All: | | 505 | 100,0 |

The results of the research suggest that the high occurrence of bullying/victimization (victim: 26,14%, aggressive victim: 26,53%, attacker: 12,87%) at schools considerably influences the personality development of the pupils, their peer relations, psychic situation and their general satisfaction with their schools. The fact that 34,46% of the pupils are not directly affected (they are only spectators) does not mean that this group requires no attention, and teachers and psychologists should not pay attention to these pupils.

In accordance with the findings of international research programs I have found that the frequency of aggressive behaviour significantly increases among spectators (eyewitnesses) after they have seen a number of aggressive incidents. My own observations appear to indicate that, for various circumstances, most of the eyewitnesses—the spectators—are unable to remain passive and idle observers of the events in most of the cases. Some join the aggressors, whereas others make some vague attempts at defending the victims, and very few of them are able to stay "neutral."

My results lead me to the conclusions that there is a considerable difference between boys and girls. The representation of the two genders in the research population was nearly identical (boys: 51%, and girls: 49%). Among the victims, however, the proportion of girls

was markedly higher (girls in 62,5%, as opposed to boys in 37,5% of the cases). Among the attackers, the representation of boys was much higher (72,6%) than that of the girls (27,4 %). Boys tend to be attackers and aggressive victims, while the girls are most often the victims and neutral spectators of the events.

As far as the age of the groups is concerned, a significant difference has been found. The highest share of the victims was found among the pupils of 10-12 and 13-15 years of age. With the progress of age, especially in the secondary schools, this proportion reduces. The highest number of aggressive victims is found among the pupils of 10-12 years, in the group of pupils between 13 and 15 years the indicator is lower. The highest number of attackers who harass the others is found in the older group (13-15 years). The number is higher than that of the attackers in the group between 10 and 12 years. The aggressive victims and spectators, because of their high proportion in both the 10-12 and 13-15 age groups serve as a good "reserve" for both aggressors and victims. Personal interviews with the pupils repeatedly confirmed the assumption that many of the spectators and aggressive victims, depending on their age, regard themselves as potential victims. They often join the more powerful person—the aggressor—because they are afraid, and not because they are themselves really aggressive. My belief that the system of norms and rules of the school, too complex and not easily see-through, is primarily "advantageous" for the older pupils, is based upon the same source of information. In specific conflict situation it is easy to see that older (and stronger) pupils in a way find it natural that they have the "right" to harass, intimidate and humiliate the younger ones without any specific reason.

My research has not revealed any considerable difference between the schools according to their location, that is, village and town.

It has been clearly demonstrated that in Hungary today the phenomena of bullying/victimization are present in both villages and towns.

As for the groups of the two different backgrounds (pupils living in their own families (87,8%) and those living in state orphanages (12,2%), the two groups have been barely comparable because of the large difference in their absolute numbers. The difference in the absolute numbers, naturally, means a difference in their weight and share of the research population. At both groups, the number of victims and, especially, that of the neutral spectators, was significantly higher than originally expected. In the case of children living in orphanages, aggression is often a way of releasing tension and a way of getting into the focus

of attention. At an orphanage, the spectators are often in the position of waiting and expectation, and they frequently turn into attackers as soon as an opportunity opens up.

I do not wish to project the findings of the research to other institutions that have not been involved in the present project, and I do not intend to draw very far-reaching conclusions or to make definitive statements. At the same time, I attribute great significance to the tendencies and trends indicated by the results. I find it especially important that the findings reinforce and justify my experience and observations that I made during my daily work as a psychologist. It is a fact that bullying, aggression are existing phenomenon at our schools. The findings suggest that the number of pupils involved in school aggression and harassment is much higher than I had originally envisaged. Understanding harassment and violence at schools, and any remedy to be applied, is inseparable from the effects of the macro- and micro-environment in which the new generations grow up. I consider my research as a preliminary study. The observations made, the trends outlined, may serve as a guideline to those who wish to take responsibility for improving the situation of schoolchildren. It is advisable to carry on the examination of events at the level of the specific behaviour of the individuals. To that end, a determination is required to reveal the reasons and motivations, to identify risks. For this, research programs of the broadest possible spectrum are necessary.

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