



JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article discusses the situation of victims of violence at junior high schools, taking into consideration various forms of peer aggression, such as mobbing, bullying and the problem of the so called hazing. At the beginning, it discusses the aspects of the educational environment of junior high schools, then identifies various forms of violence at school, victim selection criteria and perpetrators' motives. The main goal is to point to some characteristic qualities or behavior that make some students susceptible to violence, make them victims. What are the consequences, what type of support do the victims need and what is the scale of this problem in Polish schools? The last part of the article is devoted to educational challenges for a school with regard to prevention of peer aggression.

Keywords: aggression at school: mobbing, bullying, hazing, victim of violence

INTRODUCTION

Violence and aggression at school has become a serious educational issue, especially in junior high schools. Both mass media and academic researchers have started to pay more and more attention to these problems. Much attention has been paid to forms of aggression and characteristics of perpetrators as opposed to victims of violence. This article focuses on the situation of victims of violence in junior high schools. First of all, it presents junior high school as a difficult educational environment, then describes peer aggression and forms of violence experienced by students, as well as strategies to cope with such aggression and violence. Later, it points to some typical characteristics of students who become victims, as well as consequences of such experiences. Finally, it refers to preventive tasks of the school.

Junior high school as an educational environment

The educational reform in Poland in 1999 has introduced three-year junior high schools in addition to six-year primary schools in the education system. One of the main goals of the reform was to ensure independence of junior high schools as separate education centers. The main goal was to adapt pre-secondary schools to psychological and physical qualities of children and create better conditions for social development that in turn should contribute to better teaching results. The purpose of the reform was also to eliminate very large urban schools it is often a very stressful and anti-educational environment (Szymański, 2000). However, reality has shown that implementation of such goals is much more difficult than it seems. In rural environment, junior high schools are often located in the same building as primary schools and many urban schools are very large and overcrowded complexes with so many teachers that they often do not know anything about one another.

The issue of educational problems in junior high schools was raised by Nakoneczna (2003), who pointed to the difficult period of psychological rebellion and pressure, to a number of complex transformations experienced by a young human being. In Poland, junior high school students are 13-16. Emotional instability, typical of this age, makes young people experience mood swings, distrust, anxiety and feeling of alienation. It is also the time of discovering one's identity. They reject role models and rebel against limitation of their rights and privileges. Their individuality often manifests in clothes they wear or their lifestyle. They break the code of social conduct and refuse to fulfill their duties, seeing how far they can push it. It all makes the educational work with young people in junior high schools a serious challenge for teachers. In theory, education was meant to return to schools in a broader scope and in a more distinct form after the reforms. However, according to Maria Dudzikowa

(2001), who referred to the report from the studies conducted by Putkiewicz and Zachorska, the situation turned out to be completely different. The reformers of the education system cannot count on effective implementation of the planned tasks in the educational area for various reasons. The author mentioned some of those reasons, e.g. "the teachers lack willingness to change situation in schools, they are convinced that the school is losing its influence on young people's behavior. The teachers express different opinions on the responsibility of school setting and teachers for such situation, they have difficulties with identification and reporting of dysfunctional issues among students. Their educational strategies of choice, i.e. strictness and anti-liberalism, do not facilitate good contacts with students or building teachers' authority."

Difficulties in educational work often result from overcrowding of junior high schools. The authors of the above mentioned report point that in one school, there are many children who do not know one another or their teachers. It is an anonymous crowd of young people in a very troublesome age. Anonymity of students weakens the possibilities of educational impact of their teachers and the teachers need time to build relations with their students. In the situation of an "anonymous crowd", they have to start with establishing a contact with students and building teachers' authority. Leszek Pawelski (2006) also points to the fact that a large number of children in one place can make them feel too confident and believe that their behavior will pass unnoticed and they could disappear in a crowd of students.

Moreover, junior high school students begin to experience numerous adolescence-related problems in this period. In this difficult period, they have to cope with changing their school and environment. Adaptation to a new environment always entails much stress. While observing the unsettling school environment in terms of increased frequency of aggressive and anti-social behavior among children, one may come to the conclusion that such reactions may be a hidden call for help, the need to draw attention to a young human being or repetition of behavior patterns of their closest family and friends" (Zięba 2009, p.110).

Aggression among students can be a consequence of numerous factors, such as relief of mental stress, behavior patterns acquired at home, functioning of a peer group, emotional disorders among students or teachers' attitudes towards such behavior.

PEER AGGRESSION – CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROBLEM

Aggression at school is a complex and multi-aspect problem. However, it has some specific features, including:

-instrumental nature;

The perpetrator engages in acts of violence in order to do harm to the victim. The perpetrator derives pleasure from looking at the victim's suffering and planning on how to hurt the victim. Use of various forms of aggression and the intent to hurt the victim is the only one of the means to achieve the main goal, i.e. weakening the victim and making the victim completely dependent on the perpetrator. The intent of such behavior is to strengthen the position of the aggressor in the group.

- disproportions in physical appearance and physical strength of the perpetrator and the victim;

The perpetrators are always stronger than the victims. The victims of aggression at school have no chance to put up a fair fight. If the victims stand up for themselves and lose, they are going to be bullied because of that as well. D. Olweus (1998, p.136) states that the "aggressor is always in the stronger position" and lack of balance of powers is the specific feature of violence called mobbing.

-threat of more aggressive attacks;

Both the perpetrator and the victim know that the fact of beating or bullying is not isolated or even incidental. Regardless of the strategy of the victim, the problem escalates; violence is more often, more serious and more troublesome for the victim.

-bullying and escalation of form and intensity of bullying;

Aggression at school is characterized by constant threatening and maintaining the domination gained over the victim. The perpetrators bully the victims not fearing the revenge as they know that the victims will not fight back or even report the violence to the teacher.

The available literature on the discussed topic also includes such terms as: *mobbing*, *bullying* and the problem of the so called *hazing at school*. The word "mob" means crowd and the verb "to mob" means to attack, to overwhelm. Therefore, mobbing takes place when a group of people makes an alliance against one person, not necessarily in an organized way, however, such group cooperates to make the victim suffer. Until recently, the term *mobbing* was understood as mental terror used by a group against an individual, however, only in relation to place of work. Currently, this term also applies to school setting because of obvious similarities between a workplace and a school class (being in the same group for many hours every day, having mutual relations and common duties). The cause for mobbing can be some characteristics of a child in the class (e.g. obesity, speech disorder or wearing glasses) (Grzywacz-Bilkiewicz, 2005, p.49) .

Bullying means abuse and intimidation. It is an offensive and hostile behavior that results in humiliation of the victims and threatens their self-esteem. Bullying at school can manifest in threats, verbal aggression, mocking, humiliation, but also gossiping and slanders related e.g. to race, religion or ethnicity (Macko 2003). Such behavior is characterized by a clear intent to intimidate and do harm to the victims and forms of bullying are aimed at humiliation of one's dignity by e.g. mocking and name calling in public, as well as ironic jokes on one's parents or siblings.

Another negative phenomenon closely related to aggression at school is the problem of the so called hazing at school, also referred to as "freshmen initiation" in school slang. In this case, the perpetrators are older students and the victims are the freshmen. The problem of hazing at school is treated as a part of the "rite of passage" in the school community. In order to become a full member of the group, freshmen have to perform various rituals and tasks, often innocent, in the form of play, taking place often during official "freshman party". However, aggressive hazing include e.g. ban on entering the restrooms, "freshman's brainwashing", i.e. putting one's head in the toilet and also stealing money, mobile phones or forcing someone to steal, as well as all the forms of humiliating the freshmen. (Sołtysiak, 2000). As we can see, some types of behavior are far from fun and even offensive.

Aggression at school can have various forms, from subtle mental bullying to physical violence. Mental bullying manifests in verbal assault – the tool of aggression in this case are words. Humiliation and social degradation in a group always does harm to one's self-esteem and is the source of suffering. School surroundings, stadiums, locker rooms and classrooms also witness instrumental or physical aggression, i.e. beating, kicking and more sophisticated forms of torture, such as flushing one's head in the toilet, stealing one's mobile phones or tearing one's clothes.

VICTIMS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Victim is a person, usually innocent, who is harmed as a result of actions of others, acts of god or unfortunate events. According to I. Pospiszyl, "victims are the epitome of weakness. The fact that they are likely to be victims actually makes them victims" (2003, p.22). Other approaches point to the fact of suffering and loss as a consequence of maltreatment or abuse as a victim is also a person who has died as a result of e.g. tortures. On the one hand, while describing the victim, we may speak about the experience of harm, on the other hand; however, we should point to specific factors making someone exposed to violence of others and likely to become a victim.

Among from many typologies of victims, the most common one is A. E. Fattah's victimology as it takes into consideration individual qualities, way of reaction to harm, as well as social circumstances. Provocative behavior can also be an important factor contributing to harm. According to the above mentioned classification, there are the following types of victims:

- non-participating victims – those are persons who are not aware of the offence made to them and persons who are helpless, but also individuals who do not try to prevent the harm;
- latent victims – those are individuals harmed because of their typical qualities and features, such as age, sex, social status or characteristics;
- provocative victims – those are victims who are aware of being involved in an offence and later become victims of such offence, e.g. a hooligan hurt in a fight;
- participating victims – those are individuals who do not take any actions to reduce or prevent damage done as a result of an assault;
- defiant victims – those are persons who are not actually victims, but gain such status in the public opinion (after Pospiszyl 2003)

Victims of school violence are usually physically weaker children unable to defend themselves; they are often isolated in their peer group. The studies show that as much as half of the students fall victim to peer aggression. Their situation is often dramatic; they are mocked, harassed and threatened on multiple occasions. They live in isolation, rejected by the group and withdrawn from social contacts. In addition, they may feel guilty for what happens to them and as a consequence, they develop an overwhelming feeling of solitude and helplessness.

Among from victims of school violence, there are also the so called passive victims. Those could be either persons, whose characteristic features make them perceived by their environment as "others" or persons who do not have any support in their group. They are insecure and anxious in their behavior. They often have a very low self-esteem, they are characterized by passive attitude and inability to make firm decisions, they somewhat consent to abuse, rejection and harassment. Fattach calls this type of victims "participating victims". Similarly, Olweus calls such type of victims "passive victims" claiming that "the behavior and attitude of the victims show the others that they are insecure and worthless individuals, who will not fight back when assaulted or offended" (Olweus 1998, p. 93)

According to comparative study conducted by Ostrowska (2007) from 1997 to 2007 on aggression in various types of schools, the junior high school students were the students who most frequently experienced verbal aggression in the form of false rumors (43.8%) and name-calling (46.7%). In the

opinion of the students questioned during the study, students who are most likely to become victims of aggression are those who are rude to others (46.7%), shy and vulnerable (52.3%), isolated from the group (43.4%) and physically unfit (37.2%). As far as the types of experienced aggression are concerned, the percentage of students who fell victim to aggression was 12.2% in 2007 and decreased by five percent in relation to 1997. The percentage of students who were both perpetrators and victims was 63.9% and also showed a slight decrease. According to studies by A. Rożnowska, intensification of violence depends on the location of the school. Acts of aggression are much more frequent in urban schools and the deciding factor is the number of students and resulting increased feeling of anonymity. The population of students in rural schools is smaller than in larger cities, most of the students know one another and their teachers, which greatly reduces aggressive behavior. Urban schools are often overcrowded, which obviously makes it more difficult to supervise students and causes problems, especially when it comes to violence among students. The study conducted by the said author also shows that teachers in rural schools react to acts of aggressions much more frequently than those in cities. (Rożnowska, 2000)

Characteristic features of victims vary depending on the types and forms of peer aggression. Victims of mobbing and bullying display similar qualities and those victims are often referred to as "scapegoats", however, the image of a student being a victim of hazing at school is slightly different. E. Dambach (2008) points that in a school setting; self-esteem of victims of mobbing is often undermined and lowered by other students. Such person is perceived as someone stupid, revolting and cowardly. In many classes, such invectives are expressed openly even in the presence of teachers. Physical abuse of victims occurs rarely. Victims of mobbing usually hold back the fact of being harmed and continue (often unconsciously) such behavior patterns that trigger harassment. Such mechanism of choosing the victim is related to displaced aggression and the image of a "scapegoat" makes an individual prone to being blamed for all the failures and unfulfilled expectations. It is the easiest and safest method of demonstration of force and intimidation for the perpetrators, who want to force their victims to be submissive with a view to rule the group and become the leader. Scapegoats can be either students whose appearance is different, who are weaker, shy or clumsy and the few who managed to free themselves from the position of victims fail to show sympathy for others, but try to see how it is like to be the stronger one instead.

The image of victims of the so called hazing is slightly different. According to studies by Zawadzki (2006), the most important feature of a victim of school hazing is their typical behavior: insecurity or shyness, but in this case also overconfidence, so standing out in any way can provoke perpetrators.

The so called “freshman” is the student of the first grade, usually short and physically weak, can be obese, disabled or wears unfashionable clothes, whereas students from villages fell victim to school hazing more often than students from cities.

Being a victim of school violence leaves a permanent mark in the mind of the victim. Consequences of such experience can include health problems, feeling of insecurity, alienation, losing faith in norms and values, but also frustration, stress and depression. The most commonly encountered behavior disorders in victims are difficulties with communication, irritability, panic attacks and low self-esteem.

The consequences of school bullying can be as follows (their intensity may vary):

- avoiding classes because of the fear of the bullies;
- irritability, apathy or even depressive disorders, the child may stop talking about school or be aggressive towards relatives and friends;
- mental illness or disability;
- suicides or revenge murders;
- long-term emotional problems;
- long-lasting feeling of helplessness that often has a negative impact on future professional career;

After years-long bullying at school, mental condition of victims is similar to that of people who survived natural disasters or fell victim to rape (Hoffman, 2005)

An important issue is the fact that not many students admit that they are victims. They do not tell anyone of the hell they are going through, usually because of fear, being afraid of escalation of harassment, threats or revenge. Sometimes they remain silent because they feel ashamed and helpless; sometimes their complaints remain unresolved or are ridiculed. In such case, a feeling of acquired helplessness may be developed. In other words, they do not attempt to fight back or try to change their situation, as they believe it would not accomplish anything. At the same time, studies show that boys are less likely to tell anyone about being bullied than girls.

Other studies conducted on a representative, Polish-wide group of over 3000 students (Komendant-Brodowska, Giza-Poleszczuk, Baczko-Dombi, 2011) show that over 60% of the respondents have experienced verbal abuse, boys more frequently than girls. As far as the type of school is concerned, almost 80% of junior high school students have experienced various forms of abuse and 27% of them suffered at least 6 forms of abuse. The percentage of victim harassment is 9% in Polish schools and in junior high schools – according to the same report – 12% for boys and 9% for girls. An important issue

is perception of potential victims through their qualities making them prone to become victims. According to such large group of respondents, the risk factors include: being a “toady” (54%), being clumsy and timid (47%), being physically weaker, looking different than others (ca. 45%), being a “nerd” (42%), being poor (35%) and being a “smartass” (31%).

HELP FOR VICTIMS OF AGGRESSION – ROLE OF SCHOOLS

The situation of students bullied at school is very difficult. Such students are often left alone and cannot count on anyone but themselves. Constant harassment causes permanent stress and alienation, making the feeling of solitude and helplessness even worse. Bullied students very rarely seek help, usually because of fear and even if they decide to look for help, the support they receive is often inadequate to their needs. Studies show that support groups that provide help to bullied students are usually family and friends, sometimes teachers. Among them, there are no priests or religion teachers and very rarely support is provided by pedagogues and school psychologists. Victims usually get informative support (information, suggestions), instrumental support (actual help), appreciation and emotional support. The latter is the most desired one by the victims. (Bekier, 2004). All the above shows the importance of diagnosis of school violence and situation of victims, which should become an important part of the school preventive scheme. Victim requires support and protection in the first place, the fact that it is the perpetrator who is always responsible for violence is undisputable. It should be stressed here that the described traits of victims, their weaknesses or being different could never be any excuse for the actions of the perpetrator. There are publications describing preventive solutions for students and teachers available on the market. It is worth to mention the already developed preventive measures (during implementation of the European DAPHNE III program) that point to three basic issues concerning prevention of violence at schools: 1-development of social competences among students, 2-school supervision and 3-cooperation with parents. (Ref. Dąbkowska and Dąbkowski, 2010). Parallel activities carried out in the above three areas can be an effective tool in preventive educational work. As Beata Zięba (p. 110) accurately points out, such preventive activities should “start with changes in our own communication with children and making similar changes for better in our families and closest environment.”

Another issue important in understanding the mechanism of bullying and harassment are the perpetrators’ motives. The main goal is to gain respect in the group and achieve dominating position. Therefore, in order to win acceptance in the group, the perpetrators pick their victims among from students who are isolated or rejected and unaccepted by the group, therefore isolated individuals

require special observation and support in establishing positive relations with others. Another important factor is standing out in a class and such type of contrast usually increases the distance between students who “stand out” and their colleagues. “One of the important part of activities aimed at modification or change of attitude [towards the others] is promotion of democratic methods of education and paying special attention to the information provided about one’s own group and other groups” (Majerek 2005, p.106) Therefore, educational work with class improving communication processes among students, teaching them assertiveness, empathy and tolerance to diversity, supported by immediate, firm reactions to bullying should effectively help schools prevent peer aggression.

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