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The Role of the Teacher in Preventing Bullying Caused by Social Inequality

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Abstract

The significant social stratification of society in modern Russia affects all spheres of society, including education. The secondary school setting is taking various measures to address this problem, but not always successfully. In this situation, the phenomenon of bullying has become widespread.

The purpose of this study is to identify the teacher's ability to prevent school bullying caused by social inequality.

The main research methods were the questionnaire conducted among schoolchildren of Smolensk (n=89) by using a modified version of the questionnaire by D. Olweus, and an interview with school teachers (n=28) which revealed that most of them did not react to bullying among students and the measures taken were a formal character.

The article shows the connection between school bullying and social inequality, as well as the role of the teacher in its prevention. The study found that students from low-income families are much more likely to suffer from school bullying than their classmates from wealthier families.

Analysis of the results shows that teachers' awareness of school bullying is low and that many teachers are not prepared to respond competently and promptly, understand the reasons and prevent it.

Authors have developed recommendations for teachers on how to prevent school bullying caused by social inequality that include various forms of activities. The goal of such activities should be to create a school environment that is incompatible with aggressive behavior, in which children will learn to understand the feelings and desires of other people, to empathize with them.

Keywords: bullying, social stratification, low-income families, social inequality, schoolchildren, teachers.

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Introduction

At present, there is a significant social stratification of the society in Russia. This problem has also affected the education sector. The school class is a micromodel of society, therefore, the “friend-foe” mechanism can operate in it and, accordingly, the “foe” can be distinguished by the criterion of social status. Social inequality is usually associated with economic inequality, and the state tries to minimize this problem at the school level by introducing a common school uniform, prohibiting the wearing of jewelry by students, etc. However, students find ways to demonstrate their property superiority and if they represent the majority of the class, this can lead to bullying, i.e. violence committed among peers repeated over time that affects the personal development and educational process of students (Sobkin & Smyslova, 2012).

A large number of studies in different countries show that bullying at school is not limited to a territorial framework, socio-economic and cultural groups. According to data received, about 50% of children were bullied abroad (Longobardi, Badenes-Ribera, Fabris, Martinez, & McMahon, 2019), and about 27.5% in Russia (Novikova & Rean, 2019), one of the main reasons is the low income and low social status of the parents of the students.

The increasing level of social inequality increases the situation of discomfort, disbelief in one's own strength. Moreover, nowadays the school has shifted the focus of attention from the function of upbringing to the function of learning, and, as a result, the extracurricular time has been left unfilled. The circumstances of a consumer society dictate very different cultural values. Thus, the increasing level of violence in society, and bullying, in particular, represents the reaction of this society to socio-cultural changes. Aggressive behavior among teenagers is nothing more than a response to the aggressiveness of the external environment.

Among the main tasks of modern education is the creation of a safe environment, and “safe” not only used in terms of technical equipment and organization of the educational process but also as the psychologically comfortable and friendly atmosphere in the children's group (Kremen, 2016, 2017). A sense of protection supports the child not only in a stable psycho-emotional state but also affects his successful development. The relationships in a group can be a basis for support as well as danger, create a sense of calm or anxiety within the educational environment. Studies prove that academic performance is significantly improved in a calm and safe environment, and the harmful atmosphere of school bullying negatively affects a child's desire to learn and provokes negative thoughts and feelings.

Bullying must be seen as an important complex issue that requires universal attention. Prevention of school bullying through the introduction of special prevention programs should be a priority to ensure the well-being of children. The role of a teacher who is able to counter bullying is especially important.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify the teacher's ability to prevent school bullying caused by social inequality.

Literature review

The phenomenon of bullying always takes place in a particular social context that encourages this type of behavior, which is sure to increase the chance of its recurrence in the future. In various studies (Del Rey & Ortega, 2008) the influence of social stratification factors (education and material well-being of the family) on the social self-determination of a teenager in the classroom is shown. Children from wealthy families are much less likely to experience bullying at school, while among schoolchildren from low-income families; the number of those who have never experienced bullying is 15% less (Sobkin & Smyslova, 2012).

Considering bullying as a social and group phenomenon in which the behavior of all involved individuals (victims, abusers, and random witnesses) affects both its continuity and its termination (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), scientists prove that in a situation of bullying, a teacher can play an important role, but usually stays out of it without intervening or helping to resolve the conflict (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003; Burger, Strohmeier, Spröber, Bauman, & Rigby, 2015; Bochaver, Zhilinskaya, & Khlomov, 2015). The role of the teacher in preventing bullying is high, but, unfortunately, teachers often choose to take a passive approach to solve the problem in the hope that children will be able to sort out the problem themselves. According to a survey of parents in Australia, about half of all children experienced bullying, and in 36% of the cases, teachers did not respond at all (Rigby, 2019).

Various studies have highlighted that children with lower socioeconomic status are most likely to be victims in bullying situations (Wolke, Woods, Stanford, & Schulz, 2001). Child victims are also more likely to come from single-parent families and families where parents are divorced (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001).

School teachers face daily conflicts among children. To understand and prevent conflict, they need to have extensive knowledge about the nature of school bullying. It can be physical violence, verbal aggression, psychological pressure (ignoring, rumors, gossip, and harassment), cyberbullying, and etc. In addition,

teachers need to distinguish between the bullying participants themselves: abusers, victims, instigators, defenders of victims, and observers (witnesses) (Salmivalli, 2010).

Students suffering from school bullying become especially sensitive, they are constantly waiting for an attack, which leads to the increased levels of anxiety and depression, which entails deterioration not only in moral condition but also in physical. At the same time, victims themselves often become aggressors due to behavioral and emotional instability and increased level of aggression and anxiety (Maruca, 2016).

Studies show that a teacher's ability to identify bullying aggressors and victims is affected by the age of students, the nature and type of bullying, and the attitude to the class as a whole (Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010). Often, bullying can take place in the immediate vicinity of a teacher, but he may not notice it or underestimates the degree of danger (Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2005).

There is a serious contradiction between the information about bullying in the class available for the teacher and the inability to cope with it. This is due to the fact that they have not received sufficient quality training and are unable to understand all sides of the problem, do not have access to many aspects of the relationship between students, resulting in an inaccurate assessment of the causes of school bullying and its consequences (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005), a heavy workload. The school authorities rarely pay attention to the problem of bullying until victimization reaches serious physical abuse. Therefore, in the early stages of bullying, all responsibility lies on the teacher.

Educators themselves call physical bullying one of the most common forms of violence after verbal aggression and neglect (Boulton, 1997; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001). However, despite empathy for the victim and a sense of responsibility for preventing bullying, educators still lack the courage and confidence to deal with the conflict (Boulton, 1997). In addition, many of the teacher's actions may not always solve the problem immediately. Thus, such a measure as meeting with parents and talking with the aggressor can only worsen the situation (Wong, 2004).

Studies show that about 60% of teachers do not allocate time for classroom discussion of bullying, and around 16.4% of teachers generally consider such activities a low priority (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2009). At the same time, many studies note that it is important to implement preventive measures at the school level to prevent bullying, rather than taking these measures afterward (Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998).

The systematic involvement of teachers in the implementation of anti-bullying programs is an effective comprehensive strategy to prevent school violence. The more knowledge a teacher has about the causes,

consequences, and measures to prevent bullying, the better he will be able to minimize the risk of bullying (Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011).

Methodology

The study involved high school students of 8-11 grades from Smolensk school settings (n = 89 and teachers of these schools (n = 28).

We considered that high school students are able to understand the problem and had no difficulties in passing the questionnaire, which is impossible for younger students. All participants were about the same age (14-18 years old) (boys -38; girls - 51).

The teachers of these schools, aged 24 to 62, were both male and female, with school experience of 4 to 28 years (male 7; female 21).

The methods of research were a questionnaire (modified «The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire») and interviews.

The modified «The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire» (Olweus, 1996) was used to determine the level of bullying among schoolchildren in general and bullying on the grounds of social inequality in particular. The questionnaire makes it possible to reveal the presence of the phenomenon of bullying, its frequency, the roles in the situation of bullying (abuser, victim, and observer), as well as the involvement of teachers and parents in this problem and children's opinion about the causes of aggression.

The study of the teachers' opinions was carried out using the interview method. The plan of our interview included 10 questions on the role of a teacher in a bullying situation. The interview included questions about teachers' awareness of the problem of bullying in general, their opinion on the possible causes of aggression, in particular, the frequency of cases of bullying due to social inequality, experience in countering and preventing bullying, and the involvement of teachers in the prevention of bullying.

Results

The questionnaire showed that 57.5% of schoolchildren were victims of school bullying, 35% were observers, and 7.5% were bullies. 50% of them said they regretted what they had done and only 3.5% said that another student deserved such an attitude. Of all those surveyed, 70% were aware of the bullying of their classmates, and 34.6% of them understood that they should have helped but did nothing, and only 28.2% admitted that they helped the victim. As for the bullying victims, about 52.5% of the pupils felt

some kind of aggression from other children, and 5% suffered from bullying every week. Moreover, the bullies were most often in the victim's class (35.9%), less often in a different class of the same grade (28.2%), 25.6%, and 10.3 in classes of some grades above or below respectively. The gender of aggressors did not play a significant role (boys - 30%, girls - 35%), but the number of attackers mattered. Thus, most often it was a group of 2-3 children (60%), less often it was a group of more than 5 students - 5%.

The main types of bullying were neglect (27%), physical aggression (6.4%), rumor spreading (14.9%), and cyberbullying (51.7%). The reasons for bullying were the absence of expensive things (53.8%), a national basis (17%). In addition, about 40.4% of all students witnessed bullying against the background of social inequality, when students from wealthier families behaved aggressively towards children of less wealthy parents and vice versa.

According to the students themselves, the situation of bullying arose because of good performance (22.5%), of unusual appearance or behavior (42.5%), of their own aggressive behavior (17.5%), of the material situation of their parents (30%).

One respondent stressed that "anger and foolishness" is the driving force behind the offenders. It was also noted that the aggressors "try to assert themselves at someone else's expense", and that they "do not do it out of great intelligence!" One student noted that some guys hurt others "because of their own complexes" or, conversely, "a high opinion of themselves". Another said that this happens "due to lack of attention and self-affirmation". Many children noted that the aggressors are usually "weak people themselves" and that "because of the presence of branded things, they consider themselves to be authoritative".

One of the schoolchildren added that bullying arises from the fact that "some children want to stand out among others, they express aggression to the weak in spirit and physically, trying to show themselves to the society, thus trying to take an "honorable" place, cause fear and respect for themselves and get surrounded by people".

A large number of schoolchildren (55%) consider the social position and material situation of parents to be frequent reasons for bullying. About 27.5% of all respondents said that there were cases in their school when a student was bullied due to a lack of expensive things, telephone, etc. In addition, about 77.5% of children noted that students from wealthy families were aggressive towards other children.

The analysis of the survey results showed that about 31.5% of schoolchildren were victims of bullying caused by social inequality.

Boys and girls are equally victims of bullying, but girls are more inclined to seek help (41.4%), while boys prefer to cope independently. However, it was boys who most often mentioned the role of the teacher in this situation (23.9%), while girls thought that the teacher did not play a big role (38.7%). In this situation, they were more inclined to get on with the offender (48.6%) rather than to avoid him (32.4%). One respondent said that he "answered with sarcasm and irony", and several children said that they did some activities, yoga or meditation. One of the survey participants wrote that "one should understand the opponent's shortcomings, why he behaves like that, one should show pity for him, talk to him".

Among children who decided to share the problem, the majority would rather turn to friends (43.6%) and parents (38.5%), than to a teacher (33.3%). Their position is clear because most students noted that teachers rarely intervene in bullying situations (55%), do not pay any attention to it at all (17.5%). Many children noted that they complained to the teacher (12.2%), but they could not influence the prevention of aggression. In most cases, the teachers tried to distance themselves from the child, to discipline the whole class without thinking about quarrels within the group.

Moreover, about 57.5% of all respondents said that they did not consider the role of the teacher to be decisive, and only 25% believe that the teacher can somehow influence the situation of bullying. That is why the majority of respondents (55%) admitted that they are trying to deal with the problem themselves.

Analysis of the interview revealed that about 53.4% of teachers were aware of the existence of bullying at school, but only 14.2% of them tried to influence the situation.

According to teachers, "bullying, like everything in the world, is gradually moving to the Internet". One of the participants noted that "this is the difficulty because it is almost impossible for the teacher to take action, he is simply not aware of what is actually happening".

One respondent noted that "he was aware of the harassment of one of the students on the Internet", but did not try to change the situation, explaining that "all the children spend time online now, this is their business".

About 44.5% of teachers admitted that there are such students in the class who has difficulty to establish relations, not only with their classmates but with the teachers as well. Teachers pointed out verbal aggression as the most frequent type of bullying (41.3%). It is followed by cyberbullying (31%), ignoring (17.7%), and physical bullying (7.1%), property damage (2.9%). As for physical bullying, teachers are trying to prevent it. However, they do this not out of altruistic motives, because, as it was put, "if something happens to them, the teacher will face the responsibility".

According to teachers, bullying was not permanent, as a rule, the aggression diminished sooner or later and lasted no longer than a month (36.8%). As a rule, the victims of bullying were children who stood out from the group by their appearance (27.4%) and behavior (23.1%). However, about 43.2% of teachers noticed that children from disadvantaged and poor families were treated much worse by their classmates. One of the respondents said, "they mock them, flaunt the fact that their parents are in a high position, and, as a rule, the victims have nothing to parry but keep silent".

25.2% noted that children from socially disadvantaged families quite often suffer from ridicule from classmates, sometimes this happens right in the middle of the lesson, and teachers try to "besiege offenders, but not to get into their own business".

Teachers emphasize that "children from families with lower social status represent an increased risk of victimization". Children from single-parent families are especially affected, "the attackers seem to feel their insecurity".

In a bullying situation caused by social inequality, teachers were rarely able to distinguish a certain type of bullying. About 31.2% identified physical bullying and verbal aggression, while rumors (11.1%) and ridicule (4.9%) were not rated as aggression.

One respondent noted that "there are children who wear clothes after brothers and sisters, they can't dream of a good phone, and, of course, this fact becomes a reason for ridicule". Very often these children do not feel comfortable in their own families; parents are often not involved in the child's life, including school.

The importance of the parents' level of education was noted. One respondent said, "if a child is from a family where parents do not have higher education and high social status, then other students immediately begin to taunt him, perhaps this is customary in their families, but this child is very traumatic, he cannot complain to parents, fearing that this will upset them".

However, several teachers noted that the children turned to them for help, the same teachers tried to influence the situation, "which was very difficult to do, because they are no longer junior schoolchildren who can simply hit someone. There was aggression in the form of ignoring, chuckles behind the back, rumors, and this actually cannot be stopped, and the abusers know this".

Most teachers noted that they are informed about how to behave in a bullying situation, but rarely put this knowledge into practice and are unlikely to do so, because "the problem is very complex, each case is unique, terrible to hurt, to make things worse not only for the victim but for the abuser as well". It is

especially difficult to take action when there are several abusers and victims, "it is necessary to be able to convey to everyone that it is not good to hurt others' feelings". It was also noted that "even after some measures taken it is difficult to say that the conflict has been resolved, the conflict may have moved to another level, to social networks, for example".

The only activities related to bullying by most teachers (88.5%) included conversations with offenders and victims and were more formal (situational) character than a preventive one. Many noted that they wanted to help the victims but did not know what to do (67.3%).

Many reported that children themselves did not come into contact (38.4%), both the abusers and the victims. Conversations with parents of the victims also did not affect, as they were too busy at work and did not pay enough attention to the child. The conversation with the aggressor took place, as a rule, after classes (12.4 %) and was similar mainly to a reprimand for inappropriate behavior as a whole than to an explanation of wrong actions in a situation of bullying.

Discussions

The study showed that students from low-income families are much more likely to suffer from school bullying than their classmates from wealthier families, i.e. the bullying is caused not only by the child's characteristics and academic performance but also by the social status of their parents.

Bullying caused by social inequality is one of the top priorities among other types of bullying, which is quite obvious. Children from families with different incomes may go to the same school. In this situation, conflict is inevitable, which can subsequently develop into bullying.

The data obtained indicate that only 31% of teachers were able to recognize aggressive behavior and only 12% of them took any actions.

Teachers believe that the most frequent types of verbal bullying are mockery, nicknames, and rumors. Often there is total disregard, "banishment" from their group. Physical bullying was not so common, and such cases were not observed at all in 10-11 grades. Quite often, students took other people's things, but there was no damage to property, it was a special kind of bullying.

The study showed that more than 42.7% of teachers believe that bullying often takes place outside the school, thus, they seem to resign responsibility.

Many teachers were aware of the existence of bullying by watching children during breaks, classes and extra-curricular activities, but children themselves didn't tell teachers about their problems, which indicates not only a reluctance of students to tell teachers about bullying but also a lack of confidence in the teachers themselves to help students. The study found that most students did not believe that teachers would help even if they were told about bullying, and they also questioned the effectiveness of school rules. This proves that anti-bullying programs will not be effective unless students themselves are convinced that they are effective.

The most effective measures to prevent bullying, according to teachers, were: contact with parents (41.7%), talking to the aggressor (27.9%), meeting with the abuser, the victim and their parents (11.4%) and increased control over children's behavior during breaks and classes (9.8%) and others.

Teachers also proposed various ways to solve the problem of bullying.

The most preferable were: a mediation strategy, where the teacher needs to listen to both the aggressor and the victim, both together and apart, and offer a solution that is convenient for both, or pay more attention to the abuser, also having a conversation with him, activities for the formation of a common culture, the development of values, and others.

But at the same time, only 2.3% of teachers put these actions into practice. In general, teachers noted that parental involvement was particularly important in situations of social inequality bullying, but when this did not happen, the teacher did not take action himself.

Conclusion

The results of the study suggest several conclusions: 1) teachers' awareness of school bullying is low; 2) many teachers are not ready to competently and promptly respond to bullying among students, understand the reasons and prevent it, including due that the reasons are the specifics of each bullying case; 3) the school administration does not have a comprehensive approach to solving the problem of bullying; 4) the lack of special training of school specialists in effective ways of preventing bullying. Therefore, it is very important to teach educators to respond appropriately, recognize, and prevent bullying.

At the same time, many aspects of this problem remain unclear. There is a need for more research to understand other aspects of social inequality bullying, including the problem of aggression by students from low-income families towards the children of wealthy parents.

To minimize bullying in the school environment in a timely and effective manner, we have developed recommendations for teachers that include various forms of activities. The purpose of such events should be to create an environment that is incompatible with aggressive behavior, in which children will learn to understand the feelings and desires of other people, to empathize with them. All changes should be carried out comprehensively, not only at the level of the class but also at the level of the whole school. It is necessary to create essentially new school culture and the rules of behavior directed on change of the attitude of students and helping them to get a better understanding of the harm caused by bullying. There should be work with children at the level of a class by a discussion of themes of aggression and bullying, increasing trust to the teacher. It is also possible to conduct workshops where children, together with teachers, will be able to develop communication skills, empathy, and strengths of character in general. Indeed, increasing the moral, social, and behavioral competence of students can effectively prevent bullying. On the part of the school administration, they should carry out work with teachers aimed at expanding their knowledge and ways to counter bullying by students and restorative practices.

Thus, in order to effectively implement the work to prevent bullying, it is necessary to form a clear structured plan of action taken not only by the school administration, psychologist, social educator, and teachers but also by students and their parents. All the participants in the educational process must be aware of the peculiarities and consequences of bullying and of the measures and ways to prevent and stop it. All these measures require a systematic approach, involving each teacher in the work to create a favorable school environment as an effective way to deal with school bullying.

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