

Bullying in Upper Secondary Schools from the Perspective of Beginning Guidance Counsellors

Šikana na středních školách pohledem začínajících výchovných poradců

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Abstract:

The contribution deals with bullying in Czech upper secondary schools and focuses on the roles and knowledge of guidance counsellors in this issue. A qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews with novice guidance counsellors provides deeper insight into dealing with bullying. The research findings identify the most common forms, frequency and intensity of bullying, as well as the state of knowledge of guidance counsellors in the theoretical and legislative framework related to bullying. Furthermore, the readiness of guidance counsellors, their colleagues and schools themselves to deal with school bullying is determined. The results suggest that most schools and guidance counsellors have adequate knowledge and are prepared to respond quickly and effectively to bullying.

Keywords:


Bullying; upper secondary school; educational counsellor; legislation


Abstrakt:

Příspěvek se zabývá šikanou na českých středních školách a blíže se zaměřuje na role a znalosti výchovných poradců v dané problematice. Kvalitativní výzkumný přístup za využití polostrukturovaných rozhovorů se začínajícími výchovnými poradci poskytuje hlubší vhled do řešení šikany. Výsledky výzkumného šetření identifikují nejčastější formy, četnost a intenzitu šikany, ale také stav znalostí výchovných poradců v teoretickém a legislativním rámci týkajícího se šikany. Dále se zjišťuje připravenost výchovných poradců, jejich kolegů a samotných škol na řešení školního šikanování. Výsledky naznačují, že většina škol a výchovných poradců disponuje adekvátními znalostmi a je připravena rychle a efektivně reagovat na šikanu.

Klíčová slova:

Šikana; střední škola; výchovný poradce; legislativa

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1 Understanding the dynamics of bullying in upper secondary schools

The term *bullying* comes from the French language "*chicane*", which can be understood as aggressive negative acts of harassment towards others. These acts include aggression, violence, hostility or abuse. In general, bullying is characterised as targeted behaviour that enables the physical or psychological abuser to gain a sense of superiority and some advantage over others. Bullying is usually a recurrent and prolonged (Bělík et al., 2017).

Bullying is divided into different stages and each stage is characterized by different behaviours. Kolář (2011) mentions peaceful, medium and third stage bullying. Mild stage behaviours may include teasing, name calling or exclusion from the group. This stage is not considered as severe and is often resolved by verbal agreement. Mild bullying behaviour includes physical acts such as hitting, pushing or harassment. This stage can have an impact on the victim's mental and physical well-being. The moderate level is addressed through disciplinary sanctions or counselling. Finally, there is the highest level, which may include physical violence, sexual violence or other forms of abuse. For this level, law enforcement or other professional services are used.

Understanding the extent of bullying is an important step in preventing and addressing the behaviour. By recognising the different levels of severity, individuals and communities can take appropriate steps to address bullying behaviour and create a safe and supportive environment for all.

Today's modern age brings many positive innovations, but unfortunately, it also brings other dynamic negative trends. A phenomenon of today's negative trend in the high school environment is bullying taking place on social media, in other words, it is cyberbullying. Through digital technology and social media, "traditional" bullying is often escalated. Most of all, one can encounter gossip, insults or threatening messages or emails (Chromý, 2010).

Although online bullying is on the rise, physical and psychological bullying is still a hot topic. In high schools, there is a certain social status for every student. If someone wants to "boost" their social status, they often choose a potential victim who is different in some way, whether it is the visual or intellectual side of the individual. Aggressors use methods such as blackmail or threats of bodily harm. The psychological side of bullying may include verbal attacks that are used to gossip or rumor, it also includes manipulation, exclusion, intimidation, ignoring, or humiliation (Bendl et al., 2016).

Another significant element that greatly influences bullying today is anonymity and lack of surveillance of cyberspace. As a result, aggressors often feel safe and unpunished, which can lead to even more aggressive behaviour and an escalation of bullying behaviour. At the same time, new forms of bullying are on the rise, such as doxing, where the victim's personal details are published online, or bullying through photos and videos.

The consequences of bullying can be extremely serious, as victims often face psychological and physical problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and, in the worst cases, suicide attempts. These effects can be felt over the long term and are detrimental to the victim's personal well-being (Hutyrová, 2019).

Given these dynamic impacts, society and educational institutions must be actively involved in preventing and addressing bullying. This requires not only the introduction of effective prevention programmes in schools, but also greater public awareness of bullying and support for victims in the coping and recovery process. This is the only way not only to reduce the incidence of bullying and create a safer and more welcoming environment

for all individuals, but also to improve the classroom and school climate in secondary schools (Miovský et al., 2010).

However, it is not only technological advances that are responsible for the escalation of bullying, but also the lack of qualified professionals in the school environment. According to the annual report of the Czech School Inspectorate (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a) for the school year 2022/2023, all secondary schools in the Czech Republic have only 28.9% of school psychologists, 7.5% of special educators and 0.8% of social educators. This figure was calculated from the total number of secondary schools, which in 2023 was 1,316.

In educational institutions, it is still possible to encounter the views of school principals who claim that nothing of the kind can happen in their schools and, if something potentially does occur, attribute it to mere "play". The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports imposes a duty on schools to ensure the safety and health of children and they are obliged to address bullying to avoid escalation of problems (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2016).

It can be very difficult to identify bullying, especially in a school setting. Bullying often takes place covertly or in situations where it is not sufficiently monitored by school staff. Victims may be afraid to share their experiences and may fear repercussions, which can lead to underestimating or hiding the situation. As a result, many cases of bullying go undetected or unreported, which can have serious consequences for the health and well-being of victims. However, educators sometimes consider behaviour that should not be considered bullying. There is a distinction between bullying and teasing. Teasing is very similar to bullying and closely resembles it. Teasing can be characterised as innocent teasing between children, most often occurring in the second year of primary school when, for example, boys tease girls because they like them. If educators or parents are unsure whether bullying is taking place, they need to consider whether the behaviour is met with a preponderance of power over the victim (either physical or psychological), whether the victim perceives the attack as unpleasant (derogatory name-calling or remarks) and whether the attack is prolonged. (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014)

An investigation by the Czech School Inspectorate in 2023 shows that cases of bullying are increasing (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023b). For this reason, there are a number of documents addressed to schools, educational counsellors, school prevention methodologists and teachers that provide procedures and recommendations on how to deal with these situations (Czech School Inspectorate, 2016).

The most important thing is that educational staff pay attention not only to the aggressor and the victim, but to the whole group. Bullying does not always have to concern just one person, but the whole class. Therefore, educators have methodological guidelines, but also legislation, methods and training programs that can better prepare them and inform them about modern ways of working with aggressors, what methods they use, but also help them to better work not only with the victim, but also with the whole group (Bělík & Hoferková, 2018).

2 Dealing with bullying: Insights from theoretical and legal framework

In recent years we have witnessed a growing trend of aggressive behaviour, particularly in the form of bullying in educational institutions. Increased manifestations of aggressive

behaviour occur mainly among classmates. Addressing these problems should be the responsibility of educational staff, psychologists and other professionals (Černý, 2023).

However, there is a situation when even pedagogical or therapeutic approaches do not provide an effective solution and therefore the school and teachers have to turn to law enforcement authorities. Unfortunately, at present, bullying is not a separate criminal offence as the concept is complex and takes many forms. The absence of a specific legal framework for bullying means that no law or legal norm explicitly defines or criminalises it. Another important issue is Act No 40/2009 Coll., the Criminal Code. According to Article 25 of this law, in order to prosecute an aggressor (perpetrator), the aggressor must have reached the age of 15. Other circumstances of liability are set out in Section 109 of the Criminal Code (Antl, 2022).

The treatment of bullying within the legal system can be based on several legal bases and paragraphs that reflect the relevant aspects of the issue. Within the Czech legislation, schools and parents can rely, for example, on the following laws, decrees and paragraphs:

- a) Act No. 40/2009 Coll., Criminal Code:
 - § 122 - Bodily injury and grievous bodily injury,
 - § 171 - Restriction of personal liberty,
 - § 173 - Robbery,
 - § 175 - Extortion,
 - § 186 - Sexual coercion,
 - § 228 - Damage to property,
- b) Act No. 89/2012 Coll., Civil Code:
 - § 865 - Parental responsibility
- c) Act No. 561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher vocational and other education (Education Act), as amended:
 - § 22a - Rights of teaching staff (in particular point a),
 - § 22b - Duties of teaching staff (in particular point c),
- d) Decree No. 72/2005 Coll., on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling centres, as amended:
 - § 2 - Purpose of counselling services: a) creating appropriate conditions for the healthy physical and mental development of pupils..., d) preventing and solving educational and educational difficulties, preventing various forms of risky behaviour.

Dealing with bullying under the law requires a careful assessment of the specific situation and the application of the relevant legal norms to the case. At the same time, it is important to ensure that victims of bullying are protected and provided with appropriate legal and social assistance (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2014).

The protection of the rights and interests of the child is the responsibility not only of the school counselling centre but also of the OSPOD (Orgán sociálně-právní ochrany dětí in Czech), i.e. the Department of Social and Legal Protection of Children (in short DSLPC). This service is responsible for protecting the rights and interests of children and adolescents. Its main mission is to prevent and resolve situations that may endanger their safety, health or development.

In the context of bullying, which can have serious consequences for the psychological and physical well-being of children and young people, the DSLPC can play a key role. This department is very important because it can work with both the school and the family.

DSLPC focuses on prevention, intervention, family support and legal procedures, but also on education, which can serve not only parents and schools, but also the children themselves (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2020).

3 Results of the survey - the view of novice guidance counsellors on bullying

The research inquiry (see Hromadko, 2024) was designed around four sub-research questions. The first sub-question focused on the basic characteristics of bullying in the school environment, specifically identifying the most common forms and causes of bullying, as well as the intensity and frequency of bullying in the respondents' schools. The second sub-question aimed to determine the level of knowledge of educational counsellors about theoretical and legislative aspects of bullying. The survey covered awareness of relevant documents and laws related to bullying, teachers' obligation to report cases of bullying, their attitudes towards dealing with such cases, and cooperation with external institutions outside the school, such as the police, the Department of Social and Legal Protection of Children, or NGOs. The third sub-question focused on identifying the characteristics of aggressors and victims of bullying. The aim was to determine whether aggressors and victims exhibit any common characteristics and whether recognizable patterns of behaviour may indicate their role in bullying. The final, fourth sub-question served to assess the practices of schools and informants themselves in dealing with bullying. The questions focused on their preparedness, assessment of counselling centers, and assessment of colleagues' preparedness.

All interviews revealed that cyberbullying is the most common form of bullying and is much more challenging to address nowadays. It often involves the distribution of inappropriate photos, messages or even verbal attacks on the person. The informants' statements also coincide with research by the Czech School Inspectorate, where the results showed that cyberbullying is the most common form of bullying. The difficulty in dealing with bullying lies in the maturity of information technology, where anyone can create an account under a false name and details, making it difficult to track down the aggressor.

Informants identified any kind of disadvantage as the most common cause that leads to bullying. For example, it could be poor financial security or poor family relationships. They also take into account age, gender, as well as appearance and, for example, how they dress. According to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the reason for this is the lack of time for prevention programmes and, above all, the lack of qualified methodologists.

The intensity and frequency of bullying varies, as the informants come from different types of secondary schools. Based on the information provided by one informant, it appeared that between ten and twelve cases of bullying occurred during one semester. According to the annual report of the Czech School Inspectorate, it was found that in the last two years, an average of around 80 per cent of cases of any form of bullying had been detected in all secondary schools.

Knowledge of theoretical and legislative anchoring is, in the authors' opinion, below average. Although the informants know important school laws, many of them did not mention, for example, the Criminal Code, the Civil Code or the relevant decree of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. On the other hand, however, all informants knew

that they were legally obliged to report bullying or any indication that pupils might be involved in it.

As already mentioned, bullying is a very difficult and challenging process for schools and their staff. Therefore, whistleblowers often turn, for example, to non-profit organisations that are dedicated to the prevention of risky behaviour. They also contact the Police of the Czech Republic, which also organises a number of prevention programmes for pupils, or the DSLPC, which can help the family, the school and its staff.

Naming the common characteristics of an aggressor was quite challenging for novice educational counsellors. All informants, except one, agree that aggressors are often those who are more vulnerable, have low self-esteem or are excluded from the collective. The common characteristics of victims were even more challenging. Many informants did not know, some attributed the role of victim to a quieter type, some to a good and reliable student, or simply to anyone who appeared in the wrong place with the wrong people. Despite all the associations, it always ended up making a difference. Be it a difference in appearance, nationality or character. Beginning guidance counsellors often agreed that attributions are often based on past experiences. The aggressor was a "somebody" and there was also something typical for the victim and therefore he takes his past experiences.

Self-assessment is one of the most important elements for teachers and guidance counsellors. The informants' responses suggest that some see themselves as competent to deal with bullying and some need more experience. All informants agreed that if it were possible and they had more colleagues, it would be much better and they would have more confident support in situations where their competence was not sufficient. However, despite these statements, informants responded unequivocally that they were able to deal with bullying or any risky behaviour. Unfortunately, the informants' assessment of their colleagues was more negative. Although the procedures and duties of teaching staff are enshrined in school ordinances and laws, in many schools they do not address this and rather, according to informants, "hand it over" to educational advisors.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, which deals with bullying in secondary schools, it is necessary to stress the importance of a concerted effort to build respect, solidarity and safety in the school environment. Understanding the reasons why bullying occurs and how it affects the lives of young people is key to effective prevention and intervention.

Children may bully for many reasons, including a lack of self-esteem, a desire for power, a lack of understanding of the consequences of their actions or the influence of their environment. Bullying can also be driven by group dynamics and pressure to conform to social norms.

Why do children sometimes not fight back or report bullying? Reasons can range from fear of retaliation to fear of isolation in the collective to lack of trust in the institutions that are supposed to deal with the situation, such as teachers or school administrators.

It is not uncommon for adults, including teachers, to overlook bullying or not consider it a serious problem. This may be due to a lack of appropriate tools to identify bullying behaviour, a lack of awareness of the consequences of bullying or a fear of confronting difficult situations.

It is important not only to focus on anti-bullying interventions, but also on prevention and building a supportive environment in schools. This includes strengthening social and emotional skills, fostering trusting relationships between pupils and adults at school and creating an environment where every pupil feels listened to and respected. It is also important to have competent and qualified professionals in the school.

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