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The effectiveness of school-based violence prevention programs for reducing aggressive behaviour

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Abstract

According to the research studies conducted in various schools, it has been determined that 20% of the students enrolled in the mass education system develop under the influence of violence, in all its aspects: physical (bullying, aggressions, vendettas), verbal (swearwords, insults), emotional (blackmail, humiliation, terror) and sexual (harassments, assaults). To imagine prevention strategies means to take into consideration all the factors (social, familiar, school and personality) that can determine the students violent behaviour. School ought to play an important part in preventing school violence (even if the sources come from outside).

The present paper proposes an individual assistance programme for students, teachers, and parents, as actors in the educational process. On long term, this process aims at: acquiring awareness in respect with the consequences of violent acts and their cessation; improving the image and self-esteem of the individual and taking on responsibilities; preventing the occurrence of negative affective dispositions; and developing self-control and independence.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The school violence issue

Violence is one of the biggest issues of the contemporary society. Media, both written and audio-visual, provides information with respect to different manifestations of this phenomenon. Three elements underlining the meaning of this concept can be identified: violence is interaction (involving one or more actors), it is an act of prejudice (corporal, moral etc), and this prejudice manifests itself through various means (either direct or indirect).

Pierre-André Doudin and Miriam Erkohen-Marküs discuss three prevention types which the school can carry out (Erkohen-Marküs & Doudin, 2000). These types are complementary:

1.1.1. Primary Prevention

It is accessible to every teacher. Its role is to develop positive attitudes in students by expressing confidence in their ability to succeed. Stress is laid on the student's effort valorisation. Suggestions:

The active and reflective listening will help the students to make their feelings clear: "It seems to me that it bothers you. Which do you think it is the best solution?" It is a communication form by which the individual has the possibility to express emotions, feelings and opinions. Criticism should be avoided, as well as labelling or harsh comments.

Assisting the student in choosing ways of finding solution or intervention in a certain context: "Which do you think it is the best solution?" or "How would you fix this problem?"). This alternative will lead to the identification of the pluses and minuses for each option, thus avoiding the authority conflict. The dialogic relationship between teacher and student is profoundly affected when the student perceives the teacher's requirements as constraining strategies in view of adopting a certain behaviour (Sălăvăstru, 2004).

These positive attitudes can decrease the risk of violence.

1.1.2. Secondary Prevention

The teacher can trace the effects of the violence acts the student has been subject to outside the school environment by careful observation. The teacher informs the authorities (psychologist, social assistant, the Police) with regard to these cases and they, in turn, take the specific measures to protect the child.

1.1.3. Tertiary Prevention

It presupposes direct support for students manifesting violent behaviour, either verbal or physical. The teacher's primary concern is to initiate occupational therapy activities for re-integrating the deviant students in the social environment and for the elimination of the negative feelings. Thus, the teacher prevents the chronicisation of the disorder produced by violence.

In the first stage, full transparency is required in what the teacher's action mode is concerned. The teacher establishes the norms, the allowed tolerance limits and the punishment for breaking the rules. The teacher will openly encourage the desirable behaviour and will intervene in the cases of violence, in or outside the school. The conflict solving presupposes:

- assertive communication (use of assertive messages in the first person and the description of the expected behaviour: "I want you to...", "Now you should..."). The assertive communication is much more effective than passivity or aggressiveness, which tend to accentuate and aggravate the existing issues;

- recourse to rules and immediate punishment in accordance with the seriousness of the deed;

- proximity control (teacher and student togetherness is often effective, influencing the student's behaviour to a great extent).

It is common knowledge that learning through imitation or providing models are important aspects in the child's development. Even in the absence of educational pressure, the children tend to identify themselves with parents,

legal guardians, educators or friends of the same sex. They imitate out of an internal tendency, having an innate predisposition to learn (through imitation). The educational influences coming from the adults mould the attitude directly, as well as children's behaviour. In the circumstances of a tensed, conflictual, unstable family environment, the school can be the student's second chance.

2. Research objective

Drafting of an action plan structured on modules, in accordance with the intervention strategy and the imposed educational environment, which will improve the relationship between teachers and students, but also the ones within the students group. The educational programme is intended to manage conflict situations in and outside the school (see student – parent interaction).

3. Directions concerning the drafting of the school violence prevention plan

The proliferation of the violent acts in school institutions must lead to the layout of coherent directions concerning prevention, attenuation, or even elimination of the unwanted behaviour. To this effect, the directions will have in view:

- to develop the students' school skills for ensuring success and increase in self-esteem, which would facilitate the school integration;
- to fight truancy;
- to develop the mediation skills as means of solving conflicts;
- to make the students and their families responsible with regard to school-life rules;
- to resort to mediation and individualised alternative methods in the school's discipline council;
- to develop the information and counselling activities for parents and students;
- to found specialised counselling centres for the selection and psychological counselling of the students who depict aggressive and violent behaviour. The parents or legal guardians will be included in the behavioural therapy courses;
- to apply cognitive-behavioural techniques for the moral judgement development and for the aggressiveness attenuation/elimination; e.g., roleplay and the cognitive conflict experience; programmes for developing maturity in interpersonal relationships; training of social abilities;
- to amend the competences in dealing with information concerning day by day issues; the technique of abiding by the 'behavioural contract';
- to create an appealing school-life (e.g., *A different kind of school* - National Program);
- to provide pleasant ways of spending the spare time which will combine amusing aspects with the formative ones, considering the students' age specificities;
- to intensify the 'open school' activities during holidays for students with difficult economic and family situation in view of improving the relationships between youths and adults and of creating new relations between students and the school institution;
- to start new operative intervention programmes which would result from the debate of various study cases concerning violence in real life during the Civic Education classes or other educational activities.

4. Intervention strategies

4.1. Teacher training courses

Organisation of teachers' training courses which will present the necessary tools for the management of critical situations in class and the adjustment of the intervention methods:

- careful observation of the students' behaviour for a better understanding of the causes which lead to violent acts;
- improvement of the communication with the students who manifest violently and establishment of relationships based on trust;

- development of the school-family partnership;
- tight connections with experts from other institutions dealing with fighting and prevention of school violence.

4.2. Counselling and orientation for students with behavioural disorders

The experts in the field believe that aggressiveness at the school level is the effect of the student's underestimation, the frequent criticism, the teacher's lack of diplomacy, or the sense of frustration. For fighting back these aspects, it is necessary to create a favourable climate for the learning activity; to assign accessible, individual, attractive and motivational tasks; to promote an objective assessment of the students' performance; to support positive behaviour, etc.

Nevertheless, the systemic observation of the class and drafting psycho-pedagogical files for each student allow us to assert that there are significant differences between the level of verbal or physical violence of male and female students. Moreover, there are significant differences between the level of verbal or physical violence of the students in Science or Technical fields and the ones in Humanities. At the psychological level, we note that the extrovert students are more violent and act more impulsively than the introvert students.

It is compulsory to develop an individualised relationship with the students with behavioural disorders. Every time a student manifests violently, the teacher must start a counselling programme, a conversation outside the school hours, in view of identifying the factors which have led to the behavioural disorder. This one-to-one conversation with the student also means a change in climate, in situation, which may help the student reconsider his/her attitude or behaviour. The teacher must listen to the student and only intervene to express his/her emotions or feelings ("I am troubled when..." "I am worried because...").

However, within the social environment, there are factors which may either block or favour the effective communication. G.H. Porter (1950) presents six possible attitudes in a conversation:

The assessment attitude – implies the evaluation of the students' deeds or gestures by relation to norms or values. e.g. "You are not making any effort to improve your school behaviour". Results: the student feels guilty and may either rebel or submit to the teacher's judgement.

The interpretation attitude – the teacher analyses the student's behaviour starting only from an apparent reality; the result may be biased or tendentious. e.g., "You say you do not understand, but you actually refuse to work or to self-discipline".

The decision-making attitude – the teacher proposes immediate solutions and makes the decision for the student – this attitude may induce agreement on the part of the student, however, it does not offer the latter the chance to find a solution. Giving solutions through aggressive, authoritarian questioning or recommendations may lead to affective blocks. The teacher's complete control over the student's behaviour may lead to failure or even to adverse reactions.

The investigation attitude – the teacher is asking too many questions in order to get the whole picture for the situation. The student perceives this attitude as an inquiry which does not allow him/her to defence.

The support, encouragement attitude – is intended to support the student to overcome the difficult situation. Intervention methods (Iucu, 2006): to create a balanced learning environment, to avoid and prevent educational mistakes; to support the school interests and preoccupations by acknowledging success, to integrate the student in a therapy group.

The comprehensive attitude – reflects the teacher's efforts to listen to the student without judgement. This attitude has in view the profound understanding of the individual. The teacher pays attention not only to the student's words, but also to gestures and establishes intercommunication or a socio-affective relationship with the student in accordance with the latter's psychological needs.

5. Conclusions

The attainment of the objectives pursuing to decrease school violence may be facilitated by abiding by certain conditions: the students are informed with respect to the provisions of the school regulations concerning discipline; the school discipline management is improved; psychological and psycho-pedagogical counselling is provided

frequently and especially in crisis situations, for students, but also for teachers and parents. At social level, it is necessary to make campaigns for raising awareness with respect to school (and outside the school) violence acts. At national level, a permanent system will be implemented for monitoring the violence phenomena in the educational environment and the scientific research in this area will be further encouraged.

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