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SCHOOL BULLYING AS A CONTRIBUTOR TO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

The article examines school bullying as a serious socio-psychological problem that is widespread among students all over the world and leads to serious consequences for their mental health and academic motivation. In Armenia, bullying is also a pressing issue, but there is no legislative regulation in this area. The study seeks to identify effective strategies for assisting students experiencing bullying. Bullying is defined as a form of psychological violence that includes constant bullying and humiliation. Research indicates its negative impact on the psycho-emotional state of the victim, leading to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as well as on the educational process, reducing motivation and academic performance. The article describes specific cases of bullying, emphasizing the need for comprehensive socio-psychological support. The authors offer various methods and psychotherapeutic approaches to assist victims of bullying, including working with self-esteem, developing confident behavior, and strengthening mental resilience.

Keywords: *school bullying, psychological violence, social-emotional learning, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, mental health.*

INTRODUCTION

The problem of bullying in RA needs strong juridical regulation and professional support. Therefore, we have not yet comprehensively revealed the scientific bases for assessing bullying as a mental health risk, particularly when considering it as an object of social-psychological support. In particular, few studies focus on combining individual and team efforts to overcome the phenomenon of bullying and its negative consequences.

According to another definition, bullying is conscious, prolonged violence by bullies against the victim (Aver'janov, 2013, pp. 3). Regrettably, bullying in RA is pervasive in public educational institutions,

targeting students based on their physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and other personal characteristics. There is a noticeable gap between the prevalence of bullying and students' willingness to acknowledge it as a problem. Thus, in the course of our psychological work, we also often meet visitors who are no longer in school but state that they were bullied during their school years and have a traumatic experience and memory. If the traumatic experience remains unresolved, it can lead to insecure social behavior and negatively impact the person's mental health. These effects can persist for a long time and reduce the quality of life of those affected.

The current research aims to identify the effective ways of social-psychological support for students who are bullied at school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional literature extensively covers school bullying as a socio-psychological problem. Research data underscores the ubiquitous nature of school bullying, impacting one in three students globally. Studies show that bullying affects almost 32% of adolescents aged 13–15 in different regions, leading to impaired mental health and reduced motivation to learn (Wang & degol, 2020) In 2017, a survey across all areas of the Republic of Armenia and Yerevan revealed that 84% of students expressed a desire for Armenia to enhance its efforts to prevent bullying, with 38% reporting instances of physical bullying at school.

According to attachment theory, learners who have had a traumatic experience have difficulty adjusting to new social groups, often show high levels of anxiety, and may feel insecure around peers. Bullying disrupts the learner's fundamental need for security and acceptance, manifesting in their behavior and self-expression (Bowlby, 1982). Bullying hurts the student's psycho-emotional well-being. Bullied students experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social isolation. These effects can persist for a long time and reduce the quality of life of those affected.

Research shows that bullied students are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to develop anxiety disorders and 2 to 3 times more likely to develop depression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021; Espelage & Hong, 2020). In the long term, bullying can lead to reduced academic progress. Modern research (Aver'janov, 2013, pp. 45-50) proves that the victims of bullying are those students who have academic failures, behavioral disorders, or weight disorders, come from socially disadvantaged families, and need special educational conditions. Students with excellent progress are also not exempt from bullying.

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Bullying can lead to aggressive behavior in both victims and bullies. Children who have been bullied themselves may engage in aggression toward others, which then becomes a cyclical problem that affects

their social relationships (Zych, Farrington & Ttomi, 2019).

Bullying has a significant impact on the student's learning process. Many students experience decreased academic motivation, frequent absences from class, and decreased cognitive function due to bullying (Swearer, Wang, Berry & Myers, 2019). In the long term, bullying can lead to reduced academic progress. Thus, in the case of early identification and recognition of bullying, as well as professionally literate and appropriate psychological intervention, we will have a healthier educational environment, where students will feel protected and psychologically harmonious.

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Despite psychologists frequently discussing the manifestations of bullying among students, they have yet to develop a comprehensive methodological strategy to prevent bullying.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed both action research and case study methods. We used observation, psychological conversations, "Color metaphors", "My class" paintings, and student essays as methods for gathering information. "Unfinished tale", "My class projective methods of essays. In order to reveal the hidden attitude of bullied children toward the class and classmates, we used the "Color Metaphors Methodology" (Sargsyan, 2007, pp. 162). To identify whether there is child bullying, the "Bullying risk questionnaire" (Bochaver et al., 2015) has been implemented.

To shed light on the causality and manifestation patterns of bullying as a mental health disorder, we have presented individual cases of bullied students (in grades 3–9 in our public schools) who sought psychological support. These cases mirror the main features of the cases we encountered in our research.

RESULTS

Case 1: H.V.'s child is 8 years old, studying in the 3rd grade. The mother turned to my psychological help, complaining that recently, there have been significant negative changes in the child's behavior, anger, negativism, and emotional instability. In particular, the child refuses to attend school; the educational motivation has decreased sharply. The child has lost his previous vitality, often has mood swings, and shows insecure behavior. We observe social isolation in the child's interactions, which manifests as a refusal to interact with peers. We carried out psychic and psychotherapeutic work with the child for a duration of 6 weeks. We used observation and psychological interview methods. It became clear from psychological conversations that V. avoids attending physical education classes in particular. The child lacks friends in

class and experiences social isolation. Pictorial methods also confirmed the child's deep feeling of insecurity. In order to find out the nature of the child's emotional-behavioral, motivational, and interpersonal relations, we used the following tools: The child depicted himself as small and lonely, a reflection of his low self-esteem and social isolation from his classmates. The child first drew and then erased the boy in the class who bullied him. This indicates that the child perceives danger and instinctively removes the potential threat (Lomakina, 2010). The study results revealed that peers verbally and physically bullied the child, and they excluded him from team games. We carried out fairy-tale therapeutic games and exercises to raise the child's psychological resources and restore the feeling of psychological security. From the results of psychological observation, conversation, and the use of projective methods, we assume that in the classroom, the child appears in situations of psychological violence and social isolation. The child feels unprotected and lacks social support. The child exhibits a strong sense of insult and resentment, leading us to believe that further psychological work is necessary. Thus, summarizing the results of psychological works we have carried out, we conclude that the child's rejection by the class and regular harassment towards him disrupted the latter's emotional well-being, which is manifested in the child's behavior by social distance, anger, and negativism. To make the obtained conclusion comprehensive and nuanced, we consider it expedient to conduct psychological research with students and teachers in the classroom.

Case 2: The father of a 12-year-old boy (D.B.) applied, expressing his dissatisfaction over the boy's insistence on visiting the school and seeing his classmates, whom he claims regularly annoy him. However, the father decides to turn to a psychologist so that, according to his words, "the child's self-esteem will increase," "he will be able to manage himself in conflict situations," and "not to take his father to school for every difficult situation." D. B. is upset with his father because, according to his comment, "at least father should solve this issue," because he mentioned that the older brothers of the boys in the class come to school "see" them and no longer bother that teenager, and his father had brought him to a psychologist. The psychological interview revealed that the boy is plagued with anxious thoughts, such as "What if he stays alone in the classroom?" and "What if he gets hit?" She constantly fears losing her "supporters" in the classroom and regularly brings sweets, juice, or food for them, fearing that if they don't communicate with her, she will be left alone. The fear of being alone in the classroom forces the teenager to become a henchman of his peers. We conclude that the teenager frequently experiences indirect bullying. In the "My class" picture, the teenager drew his classmates from behind, a gesture that suggests social and psychological alienation. The "Color Metaphor" methodology yielded a qualitative review of the results (Sargsyan, 2007, p. 162).

Case 3: When the girl (A.E.) approached me at the age of 17, she revealed that during her middle school years, specifically her teenage years, boys in her class regularly bullied her due to her weight and

appearance. He sought psychological assistance due to conflicts he was experiencing with family members, particularly his grandmother. She harbored a desire to transition into a different gender; she faced criticism from everyone for dressing in boys' clothes and donning boys' hats; she struggled to envision herself as a girl, and she even exhibited aggression when referred to as "girl rl dear." She was no longer overweight, but she harbored a dismissive attitude towards boys who made fun of her, based on the flawed belief that "boys only harass and degrade girls." His father left the family a long time ago, and he lived with his mother and grandmother. This primary trauma was compounded by being bullied by boys his age, which led him to think inadequately. Once he transforms into a boy, he will no longer face ridicule from other boys. She had a basic belief that "all women are weak beings and cannot protect themselves." Thus, the traumatic experiences in the visitor's life are connected with the difficult history of the abusive treatment by the opposite sex, the first object of love, the abandonment of his mother by his father, and leaving him alone. Therefore, we consider denying one's gender identity as a manifestation of the defense mechanism of ostracism. In this case, we established a positive relationship with the system of "self" ideas, cognitive structures, defense mechanisms, as well as self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Specifically, we employed the "self-portrait" methodology, the psychological exercise "Treat yourself like a loved one," the psychotherapeutic technique "Letter from the Future," the exercise of reconstructing inadequate beliefs, and the "Path of Life" drawing technique. Thus, the girl overcame the cause of bullying - excess weight - but long-lasting psychological trauma accompanied her. In order to minimize these and similar cases and to prevent the negative consequences of bullying, we consider it necessary to implement a complex social-emotional support program for teenagers in our schools.

Case 4: (S. E.), 8-year-old boy. The mother complained that the boy lacks confidence, fails to take initiative, and acts aggressively in situations of emotional tension. He avoids going to the yard alone, isolates himself in the classroom, avoids contact with other children during breaks, and refers to their classroom as a "beast house." During the initial conversation, it became evident that the mother had transferred this position to the child. The child suffers from a speech tempo and rhythm disorder, which causes him to stutter, thereby increasing his independence. He is often bullied by his classmates due to his lack of self-confidence and anxiety. Avoids presenting the lesson in class. The mother exerts excessive control over the child's behavior, claiming that if she is not present, the child will face bullying and abuse of trust. It is noteworthy that such a parent's behavior can place the child in a dependent relationship, thereby hindering the child's ability to form relationships with his classmates. It is noteworthy that the child, while writing an essay about the class, focused on the classroom walls and lighting, rather than the relationships among his classmates. Thus, the child's essay focused on the social-emotional distance that exists between him and his classmates. He drew his classmates as beasts and himself as a human, pointing out the difference between him and them. We can interpret the picture, where the child presents himself as the only human

among the "animals," as a symbolic reflection of his perceptions and social difficulties.

DISCUSSION

According to the theory of symbolic interactionism, children often use symbols and images to express their experiences and interact with the world (Blumer, 1969). Recognition of similar symbols can be effective for early identification, prevention, and overcoming bullying. From research (Barlett et al., 2021), it is known that family and community social support reduces the risk of developing anxiety and depression in children affected by bullying. The "Color Metaphor" methodology's results reveal a learner's dissatisfaction with their self-image, demonstrating a correlation between the concept of "I" and concepts such as "failure," "displeasure," "present," "my" responsibilities, "my class," "my classmates," and "threat". Especially those associated with the concept of "threat" are seen in this technique as sources of frustration for basic needs. Thus, the results of the conducted research present new challenges to specialists, who must devise innovative socio-psychological strategies to foster interpersonal relationships among students in public schools. Therefore, we emphasize the need for an integrated approach, including psychologists and teachers.

Implementing suitable methodological guidelines for preventive educational work and psychological intervention in schools is crucial. It is also known from research (Barlett et al., 2021) that family and community social support reduces the risk of developing anxiety and depression in bullied children. Therefore, as we work with individual cases, we find that these children often reappear in unfavorable environments that jeopardize their mental health, leading us to emphasize systemic reforms in this area. We believe that only in the conditions of social-emotional learning among modern students in schools will the prevention of the phenomenon of bullying become realistic. Students with long-term psycho-traumatic exposure often struggle to identify and express negative emotions like fear or hurt, but Social Emotional Learning (SEL) enables them to do so (SAMHSA, 2014). Even after overcoming them, the persistence of objective factors can significantly increase the risk of re-traumatization. Through SEL, students can learn to understand others better and see them as potential friends rather than threats. SEL helps build confidence in children who feel isolated or under pressure, helping them integrate into their social environment.

CONCLUSION

The conducted research documents the presence and danger of bullying in schools as a risk factor for mental health, even in the case of practical individual psychological work. An in-depth psychological study of the cases presented also shows how widespread the objective factors that cause this danger are. This means that complex socio-psychological and educational measures are needed to overcome and stop them. The primary goal of these measures is to build supportive interpersonal emotional relations, which is

impossible without ensuring the genuine participation of all parties involved in these processes.

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