

MONITORING OF BULLYING VICTIMS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

MONITORING OBETÍ ŠIKANOVANIA V ZÁKLADNÝCH ŠKOLÁCH

Mário Dulovics (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is a theoretical-empirical analysis of the specifics of bullying, with an emphasis on pupils in the position of victims. In this paper, we present a partial analysis of the results from a nationwide research study focused on monitoring bullying in the school environment. The research was conducted through an electronic questionnaire between December 2024 and June 2025. The scale measuring student victimisation was self-constructed and was part of a broader questionnaire. The research sample consists of 390 pupils at the second level of primary school from the Bratislava and Trnava regions. Within the research sample, we identified 67 pupils (17.2%) as victims. Of this number, 50 pupils (74.6%) also experienced marginalisation in their class, and seven pupils (10.5%) reported daily fears of being physically or verbally harmed.

Keywords: bullying, school, victim, prevention.

Abstrakt

Cieľom príspevku je teoreticko-empirická analýza špecifik šikanovania s dôrazom na žiakov v pozícii obeť. V príspevku predkladáme analýzu čiastkových výsledkov celoslovenského výskumu zameraného na monitoring šikanovania v školskom prostredí. Výskum prebiehal prostredníctvom elektronického dotazníka v období od decembra 2024 do júna 2025. Škála merajúca viktimizáciu žiakov je vlastnej konštrukcie a bola súčasťou širšie koncipovaného dotazníka. Výskumný súbor tvorí 390 žiakov druhého stupňa základných škôl z Bratislavského a Trnavského kraja. Vo výskumnom súbore žiakov sme identifikovali 67 (17,2%) žiakov v pozícii obeť. Z uvedeného počtu 50 (74,6%) žiakov zároveň zažilo vo svojej triede marginalizáciu a 8 (11,9%) žiakov sa denne obáva, že im bude fyzicky, alebo verbálne ublížené.

Kľúčové slová: šikanovanie, škola, obeť, prevencia.

Introduction

Bullying is a persistent form of pathological behaviour in the school environment. Based on a comparison of research conducted by the Slovak Center for Scientific and Technical Information (CVTI) in 2005, 2009, 2014, 2020, and 2022, Janková (2023) reports that from 2005 to 2022, the number of students who were victims of bullying increased by 12% and, compared to the 2009 study, by as much as 20%.

The increasing brutality, violence, and aggression in schools is the reason why the issue of bullying is constantly the subject of interest among the general public, experts in educational practice, and decision-makers. The fact that bullying occurs in all age groups contributes to the seriousness of this phenomenon. Its consequences for the victim, but often also for the aggressor, can be dire. The multifactorial aetiology of bullying in the form of family pathology, disturbed peer relationships, frustration, personal problems, mental disorders of the aggressor, etc., ranks it among the most serious social and educational problems in educational practice faced by teachers and professional staff in schools, parents, and also the students themselves.

Bullying is also a multidimensional phenomenon which, given the specific characteristics of those involved, is often linked to other forms of threat and risky behaviour, such as delinquency, intolerance, xenophobia, truancy, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour. This interconnection multiplies its severity and points to the need for a comprehensive approach to its prevention and resolution. For this reason, all stakeholders are striving to find the most effective prevention options and effective ways to address bullying in educational practice.

1 Theoretical reflection on bullying in the school environment with an emphasis on victims

Bullying harms the physical and mental health of children and adolescents who are victims and seriously disrupts social relationships and the school classroom climate. Ballarin et al. (2023) state that victimisation through bullying is a process in which an individual is regularly exposed to intentional negative behaviour by peers over time. Emmerová (2024) describes bullying as an extreme form of aggressive behaviour in which the victim is defenceless for some reason. In an international context, authors define bullying based on the characteristics described by Olweus et al. (1993), who state that bullying is a form of aggression committed by a child/student that is characterised by three key features: the goal is to hurt another person; it is repeated; and it involves an imbalance of power or a disproportionate use of force. These characteristics of bullying are accepted worldwide.

Although certain specific characteristics distinguish typical victims of bullying in the school

environment in the professional literature, under certain circumstances, virtually anyone can become a victim (Hroncová et al., 2020; Hoferková et al., 2017; Říčan, 1995; and others). *Guideline No. 1/2025 on the prevention and resolution of bullying of children and pupils in schools and school facilities* states that: “the reason for bullying is mainly a specific characteristic of the victim, usually consisting of a health disadvantage, gender, religious denomination or belief, nationality or ethnic group, sexual orientation or gender identity, language, social, societal or financial status of their family, or other personal characteristics usually associated with wearing glasses, being overweight or having low physical literacy”.

Hroncová et al. (2020) further state that: “The victim of bullying is usually a child who has not learned to be assertive enough to protect themselves. Victims are usually more anxious, insecure, cautious, and sensitive than normal children. They tend to have stronger bonds with their parents, which may be due to an overly protective parenting style”. Sejščová (2021) shares a similar view, according to which the victim is a person (student) who shows their fear, withdrawal, and shyness the most and is usually the weakest in the group. The author adds that “... victims tend to be hard-working students, students with specific disabilities, such as glasses, overweight, braces, or learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, and others. New classmates who join the class are also often victims. Those who seek solitude, do not participate in class life, the so-called loners, also become victims.

From the perspective of the victims of bullying, it is an extremely hurtful and traumatic experience that can affect them for many years (Johansson et al., 2022). Students who are bullied often feel isolated, misunderstood, and abandoned, which can lead to a loss of self-confidence, poor school performance, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and even suicide attempts. Hanuliaková et al. (2016) report that, according to expert estimates, 20 to 25 per cent of children in Slovakia experience bullying by their classmates at school. Emmerová (2019) points out in this context that “... the increase in aggressive behaviour among students is currently becoming a severe problem. Such behaviour is becoming increasingly bold and, unfortunately, more brutal, and can escalate into bullying.

2 Research methods and characteristics of the research sample

A questionnaire focused on monitoring and analysing various aspects of bullying among students in the school environment was used to collect empirical data. For this paper, we analyse partial results of the research obtained using a scale of our own design focused on monitoring victims of bullying. It is a 5-point Likert scale. The points on the scale are formulated as follows: 1 – never; 2 – rarely; 3 – sometimes; 4 – often; 5 – very often.

The scale consists of 11 items that measure individual forms of bullying:

- direct physical forms of bullying (fighting, pushing);
- direct verbal forms of bullying (name-calling, insults, ridicule);
- indirect physical forms of bullying (the aggressor sends another student to hurt the victim);
- indirect verbal forms of bullying (gossiping, spreading lies, verbal insults);
- indirect social forms of bullying (social exclusion, ostracism).

We determined the reliability of the scale using Cronbach's alpha, which has a value of $\alpha=0.764$. The scale was supplemented with closed questions focused on students' fears of being hurt by someone and their experiences with social exclusion.

The questionnaire was created using Google Drive and distributed to schools electronically between December 2024 and June 2025. We used descriptive statistics (relative frequency, absolute frequency, and arithmetic mean) and inferential data analysis methods (Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Pearson Chi-Square test) to evaluate the data. We chose non-parametric tests because the data in the research sample did not have a normal distribution. We determined the normality of the distribution of the research sample based on skewness and kurtosis values and also based on a visual assessment of the histogram.

The research sample consists of 390 primary school pupils from the Bratislava (n=276 / 70.8%) and Trnava (n=114 / 29.2%) regions. Of these, 200 (51.3%) were boys and 190 (48.7%) were girls. The average age of respondents is 12.5 years. Respondents were selected for the research sample at random. A more detailed description of the research sample is presented in Table T1.

T1 Characteristics of the research sample

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	N	%
Gender		
Boys	200	51.3
Girls	190	48.7
Average age	12.5	
School year		
5	115	29.5
6	110	28.2

7	97	24.9
8	44	11.3
9	24	6.1

3 Results and discussion

When identifying victims of bullying in the research sample, we used two indicators to filter the respondents. The first indicator was the average AM score of 1.7, which the students achieved on a scale designed to monitor victims of bullying (which determines repeated contact with bullying). This score was achieved by 126 (32.3%) students in the research sample. We then analysed the second indicator in this group of students, which concerned the negative psychological experiences of students related to school (tension, anger, sadness, fear, and the like). Based on these indicators, we identified 67 (17.2%) pupils in the research sample who were victims and met both criteria. The structure of victims by gender and grade is presented in Table T2.

T2 Structure of bullying victims based on gender and school year

School year	Boys		Girls		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
5	7	23.3	10	27.0	17	25.4
6	6	20.0	8	21.6	14	20.9
7	12	40.0	12	32.4	24	35.8
8	2	6.7	6	16.2	8	11.9
9	3	10.0	1	2.7	4	6.0
Total	30	44.8	37	55.2	67	100

In the research sample, we identified more girls (n=37 / 55.2%) than boys (n=30 / 44.8%) as victims. The highest number of victims among girls (n=12 / 32.4%) and also among boys (n=12 / 40.0%) was in Year 7. Overall, the lowest number of victims (n=4 / 6.0%) was recorded in Year 9 grade. For comparison, we present the results of empirical research conducted at the end of 2022 (Dulovics et al., 2023). Although the research focused on cyberbullying, it should be noted that both phenomena are closely related and are known to often overlap in school practice. In the research sample of secondary school students (N = 2768), a slightly different structure of cyberbullying victims was identified in terms of the year they attended. The highest number of victims was recorded in Year 8 (108 / 33.5%), and the second highest number of victims was recorded among Year 7 students (93 / 28.9%). In both empirical studies, Year 7 appears to be at risk in terms of victimisation of students.

In terms of the number of victims by gender, in the 2022 study, we recorded a higher number of victims among boys (166/51.6%) than girls (156/48.5%) (Dulovics et al., 2023).

Volchegorskaya et al. (2019) identified 9.76% of pupils in a research sample of 376 primary school pupils aged 10 to 11 as victims, which means that one in ten pupils had experienced bullying. Compared to our research, this is a significantly lower prevalence. Based on our findings, every sixth pupil (17.2%) was a victim of bullying. The authors also found a difference in prevalence by gender. They identified a higher incidence of victims among boys (10.3%) than among girls (9.2%).

Subsequently, we focused our research on identifying significant differences in terms of gender and grade level among victims of bullying. The findings are presented in Tables T3 and T4.

T3 Inference analysis of differences in student victimisation in terms of gender

Gender	n	U	Z	p
Boys	30	533.500	-0.272	0.786
Girls	37			

Using the Mann-Whitney U test, we did not find a statistically significant difference between victims of bullying in terms of gender ($p=0.786$). Hanani and Piskin (2020) used a questionnaire method to investigate the prevalence of victims of bullying in secondary schools. They found that students scored significantly differently by gender on the scale used. It is necessary to emphasise specific differences in the evaluation of data with the compared research. The authors used a different procedure to identify significant differences, based on the raw scores achieved by respondents on the scale. They worked with the entire research sample, while in our case, we worked only with a part of the research sample, with students whom we identified as victims.

T4 Inferential analysis of differences in student victimisation in terms of school years attended

School year	N	H (K-W)	df	p
5	17	4.200	4	0.380
6	14			
7	24			
8	8			
9	4			

We used the Kruskal-Wallis test to identify significant differences between victims of bullying in terms of school year. In this case, we also did not find any significant differences between students ($p=0.380$).

We were also interested in how often students who found themselves in the role of victims experienced fears that someone might hurt them in class or at school. In this case, students had the opportunity to express their subjective opinion on a five-point scale (1-never to 5-every day). The findings are presented in T5.

T5 Victims' concerns about their safety at school in terms of gender and year attended

Gender	AM	Never	Very little	Sometimes	Often	Every day
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Boys	3.2	3 (10.0)	7 (23.3)	6 (20.0)	9 (30.0)	5 (16.7)
Girls	2.7	9 (24.3)	7 (18.9)	10 (27.0)	8 (21.6)	3 (8.1)
School year						
5	3.2	2 (11.8)	3 (17.7)	2 (11.8)	9 (52.9)	1 (5.9)
6	3.1	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	5 (35.7)	2 (14.3)
7	2.8	4 (16.7)	6 (25.0)	8 (33.3)	3 (12.5)	3 (12.5)
8	2.8	3 (37.5)	0	3 (37.5)	0	2 (25.0)
9	2.0	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	1 (25.0)	0	0

We found that 11.9% of pupils in the victim position are afraid for their safety and fear on a daily basis that their classmates will physically or verbally harm them. Boys scored higher on this item of the questionnaire (AM=3.2) than girls (AM=2.7).

Although we found the highest number of victims among Year 7 pupils, it is surprising that this group of pupils did not express significant concerns about their safety in the school environment (AM=2.8). The highest level of concern about their safety and fear of physical or verbal attack was recorded among victims in Year 5 (AM=3.2) and Year 6 (AM=3.1).

The last area we will focus on in relation to victims of bullying is their experience of social exclusion, as the initial phase of bullying, in particular, but also its further course, is often associated with ostracism.

T6 Victims' experiences of social exclusion in class in terms of gender and school year attended

School year	Boys				Girls				Total			
	Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	N	%
5	7	100.0	0	0	8	80.0	2	20.0	15	88.2	2	11.8
6	5	83.3	1	16.7	6	75.0	2	25.0	11	78.6	3	21.4
7	9	75.0	3	25.0	8	66.7	4	33.3	17	70.8	7	29.2
8	2	100.0	0	0	3	50.0	3	50.0	5	62.5	3	37.5
9	1	33.3	2	66.7	1	100.0	0	0	2	50.0	2	50.0
Total	24	80.0	6	20.0	26	70.3	11	29.7	50	74.6	17	25.4

Overall, almost 75% of victims experienced social exclusion by their classmates. Boys (24/80.0%) had more frequent experiences of social exclusion than girls (26/70.3%). The number of pupils who were marginalised in the class decreased in direct proportion to the school year, which may be related to the complex adaptation of some pupils when transferring to the second stage of primary school, when they may often experience a feeling of not being accepted into the group.

At the level of inferential analysis, we investigated the relationship between gender and social exclusion, as well as between the year attended and social exclusion. The findings are presented in Tables T7 and T8.

T7 Inference indicator of the mutual relationship between gender and victims' experience of social exclusion

Gender	n	χ^2	df	p
Boys	30	0.828	2	0.363
Girls	37			

T8 Inference indicator of the mutual relationship between the year attended and the victims' experience of social exclusion

School year and experience with social exclusion	N	χ^2	df	p
	67	3.863	4	0.425

Using the Chi-square test of independence, no significant relationship was found between the gender of victims and their experience of social exclusion in class/school ($p=0.363$). Similarly, we did not find a significant relationship between the year attended and the experience of pupils who are victims of social exclusion ($p=0.425$).

Conclusion

The results of the empirical research presented confirm the topicality and seriousness of the problem of bullying in schools in Slovakia. Although these are only partial results of a broader research study, they already indicate a relatively high prevalence of bullying victims among pupils. Scientific research into educational reality is of great importance in this context, not only because it provides insight into the current situation and expands scientific knowledge with new contexts, but also because it provides valuable information for school practice.

School practice and scientific research to date confirm that achieving absolute safety in schools is unfortunately unrealistic. However, this fact does not detract from the importance of prevention and appropriate intervention by teachers, school psychologists, social pedagogues, and other professionals. On the contrary, this fact confirms how imperative it is to work with children and young people and to pay attention to the prevention and elimination of risks that arise in the school environment and are a by-product of group dynamics.

The persistent presence of bullying in schools, which is often linked to other forms of risky behaviour, therefore requires systematic and effective preventive measures. The importance of early identification of victims and the provision of targeted support is key to mitigating the negative consequences of bullying and improving the overall school climate.

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doc. PhDr. Mário Dulovics, PhD.

Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy

Faculty of Pedagogy

Matej Bel University

Slovak Republic

mario.dulovics@umb.sk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9860-4376>



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