

Specifics of Mobbing in Educational Environments

Abstract

The contribution focuses on the description of a specific type of violence which is called mobbing – it means violence among employees. We state in the contribution that there are still no relevant research findings oriented to the occurrence of this socio-pathological phenomenon in school environments. We describe the specifics of prevention and solving this issue in educational environments, particularly the form of education of teachers which should be performed by means of socio-psychological trainings.

Key words: *mobbing, bossing, mental and psychosomatic consequences, research on mobbing, education of teachers, socio-psychological training, experiential learning.*

Violence at schools is perceived as a complex problem which concerns all social subjects in the school environment – i.e: students, teachers and school management. Manifestations of violence among them include mutual violence among students, teachers' violence toward students, students' violence toward teachers, mutual teachers' and students' violence and school-management's violence toward teachers or students. According to M. Kohout (2004, p.7) violence at school is "a socially established fact", which is supported by certain social and political contexts in every state. He also states that the development of certain factors dependent on state politics in the area of training and education is also related to the management of a particular school, which results, for example, in the stability of the teaching staff, teachers' interest in students, clarity of school rules, management style and the like.

We want to research into the issue of violence more in depth also within the grant task VEGA 1/3694/06, in which we will focus comprehensively on the issue of violence at schools, it means both violence and disturbed social relationships among teachers which are labelled as **mobbing**.

In the existing studies and research projects dealing with violence in the school environment, this issue included mainly the phenomenon of bullying among students, however, over the last few years this issue started to be researched and analysed in more detail (even though only sporadically) also within teaching staffs.

Since mobbing occurs more often with female staff members (which are exactly typical of school environments) and it also has its typical female forms – ridiculing, smearing, permanent criticism, spreading rumours and making innuendos without specification, we assume that this issue should be the centre of interest for many more experts who deal with educational environments.

Characterization of mobbing

The problem of **mobbing** has been dealt with by experts mainly in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries since the 1980s. According to M. F. Hirigoen (2002) the term mobbing is derived from the English noun “mob” (crowd, throng), or from the phrase “to mob” (to scold, to tackle, to attack, to crowd around ...). It is then a term which is used for labelling such group behaviour of workers the aim of which is to chase an employee out by gradually making the work situation unpleasant. Mobbing represents relentless and systematic vilification of a fellow worker (fellow workers), intriguing, suspicion, smearing and the like. It can range from bullying to organized psychological terror in the workplace. We refer to mobbing if an individual is being attacked at least once a week for the period of at least half a year and the attacks are committed by one or more persons, equal members of the staff. H. Leymann (2004) characterizes manifestations of mobbing in these categories:

1. Participating in attacks against somebody, e.g. through constant criticism, gossiping, teasing and the like.
2. Attacks on social relationships, e.g. by disrespecting and ignoring a person.
3. Attacks on social dignity through gossip, vilification, spreading rumours and causing offence.
4. Attacks on the quality of work, withholding important information, constant criticism.
5. Attacks on health under the threat of violence or sexual harassment.

Mobbing thus means excluding a worker from the staff and exposing him/her to extreme social stress. It mostly results in leaving the workplace, but the victim also starts to manifest consequences which can be divided into two groups:

- **mental consequences** - depression, disorders of attention and concentration, doubts about oneself, states of anxiety up to a suicidal action;

- **psychosomatic consequences** – heart disorders and blood circulation disorders, constrictive feeling while breathing, headaches and backaches, skin diseases, digestion disorders.

The presented consequences concern mainly personality changes, whereas the teacher's personality is considered to be the most important phenomenon of the educational-pedagogical process, also in terms of his/her model behaviour toward students and quality of job performance.

High risk groups of mobbing victims include mainly graduates who have not had any work or social experience yet, newly employed workers who join "a tight staff", workers with some distinctness (physical handicap, striking appearance, ethnic difference, religious or sexual orientation), a different gender in a typically female (or male) team, completed higher education in comparison with the majority, better job performances, popularity with the boss, and the like.

At the beginning of the 1990s the term **bossing** also started to be used in terms of disturbed relationships between staff members. Under the term **bossing** we understand psychological terror in the workplace, applied by the **superior/boss to bully the subordinated**. According to P. Beňo (2003) the authorship of this term is attributed to the Norwegian psychologist S. Kile, who used it for labelling "systematic bullying on the part of the bosses" and this issue is the youngest field from the point of view of research into violence in the workplace. Bossing is a modification of mobbing because the manifestations of bossing are often similar in character.

Bossing is manifested by the boss doing the following:

- withholding important information necessary for the subordinate's job performance, thus creating stressful situations in which the subordinate is more susceptible to making mistakes or wrong decisions;
- using various administrative-labour measures where the subordinate is redeployed to other work (usually more inferior) at short intervals and in consequence of these measures the subordinate loses interest in work;
- overloading the worker by assigning useless, all the time new tasks in addition to his/her duties, competences and abilities, which again leads to stress;
- excessive and unjustified criticism of the worker, where the excessive criticism can cause doubt about one's abilities, decreases self-confidence, and finally leads to apathy and resignation or to leaving the workplace.

Possibilities for solving mobbing and bossing in the Slovak Republic

According to the survey carried out by the MVK agency, every third worker in the Slovak Republic is a victim of mobbing and bossing, in the states of Western Europe it is every nineteenth worker. If we draw from the data of an EU study, 8.1% of workers complain about mobbing; according to the results of research carried out in Germany, Austria and Switzerland 46% of workers have faced mobbing and in the Czech Republic it was 16% of the respondents. J. Kmoníčková and I. Wágnerová (2005, p.135) present results of a study carried out by the International Labour Organization which states that mobbing in the workplace is unequivocally related to the decrease of job performance and increase in sick leave due to various diseases. I. Wágnerová (2005) presents the results of research carried out in the Czech Republic. In 2001 16% of the respondents have experienced mobbing, in 2003 the figure totalled 28%.

Since in Finland and Sweden mobbing and bossing represented a 5%-share in suicides, these countries passed special anti-mobbing laws. Similarly, also other EU countries have established various workplaces and associations focused on assistance to the victims of mobbing and bossing (in the Czech Republic it is e.g. Český helsinský výbor/Czech Helsinki Committee, the civil association Práce a vztahy/Labour and Relations, which among other things was also dealing with initiatives from the sector of education), however, there is still no such association in the Slovak Republic. Assistance to employees who became victims of mobbing is currently provided by Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva (Slovak National Centre for Human Rights), to which 28 employees appealed in 2005. Although the Labour Code bans discrimination of an employee (which is also secured by the Anti-discrimination law in force since July 2004) and determines that the exercise of rights and duties resulting from the labour-law relations must be in accordance with good manners and nobody is allowed to misuse these rights to the detriment of another party to the labour-law relations; despite that fact, this clause is probably not adhered to in practice. Similarly, also the clause which states that nobody can be pursued if they file a complaint or bring an action against another employee or the employer or if they file a motion to institute prosecution. The fact that this clause is not applied in practice either is indicated e.g. by the figure illustrating submitted initiatives to the Institute of the Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman) in the Slovak Republic – in more than 5000 initiatives submitted by both legal entities and natural persons the problem of mobbing and bossing appeared only twice, where one of the initiatives concerned exactly the sector of education. One of the studies performed by T. Rohn (2007) on the sample

of 200 teachers from Slovak schools showed that 5.5% of the respondents from this research sample stated discriminatory behaviour against them.

Education of teachers in the context of mobbing prevention

If we draw from the above partial research, we state that mobbing occurs also in the conditions of our educational facilities. There are several possibilities how to eliminate it or prevent its occurrence.

J. Porteous (2002) mentions several conditions which should be fulfilled by organizations to ensure prevention of mobbing in the workplace:

- To plan and organize work in order to prevent smearing and blaming.
- To demonstrate clearly that smearing and blaming cannot be accepted in the organization.
- To apply procedures for the early detection of mobbing manifestations and to set right inappropriate working conditions, problems of work organization or deficits in cooperation that can contribute to the origin of smearing and blaming.
- To implement measures against smearing and blaming immediately when their first indications appear.

According to G. Horváth (2001) mobbing prevention can include professional training of workers dealing with the problem of mobbing. Here we cannot forget about legal education, training of assertive behaviour so that they alone are able to judge the seriousness of their behaviour, to react adequately to various stimuli or to be free from them. It is important for workers to learn certain principles of mental-hygiene and increase resistance to stressful situations. Considerable possibilities lie in self-monitoring and subsequent self-education.

H. Pačaiová (2005) offers 10 steps towards prevention of violence and harassment in the workplace:

1. To increase awareness of psycho-social risks. To provide information how to recognise harassment, risk factors of violence, and which are their consequences, how to gain information about a given issue.
2. To support an appropriate style of management and a suitable culture of organization.
3. To identify dangerous situations and assess the risk.
4. Prevention of violence – possible changes of work environment.
5. Prevention of violence – possible changes of work organization or work plans.
6. Prevention of harassment – possible changes of work organization and planning work.

7. Development and control of adherence to methods and procedures within the framework of prevention of violence.
8. Information, instructions, training.
9. Monitoring the situation.
10. Identification of sources and supporting awareness.

Olson and Nelson (2006) delimit three factors which contribute to the prevention and reduction of mobbing in organizations:

Social support – social support can act as a buffer against job dissatisfaction, looking for a new job, against incorrect behaviour at work. The emotional and informational support of fellow workers and leaders helps to prevent individuals from making arbitrary or unpremeditated, hurried decisions. Social support enables workers to reassess the situation and analyze sensitive areas. This reassessment together with the social support enables the worker to change the view of the situation.

Empathy – this emotional competence is closely related to efficient leadership at work. The ability to empathise helps workers to understand each other better, it also supports altruistic behaviour. Individuals lacking empathy can be more susceptible to aggressive behaviour. Since empathy enables an individual to look at the situation from another individual's point of view, it can impact positively sensitive work processes and mutual relations. Empathic individuals can "read" better the motives and emotions of others.

Emotional self-control – is the ability to control one's own emotions. Individuals with emotional self-control know, understand and control their emotions by situationally appropriate ways. Emotional self-control does not mean suppression of emotions, but their manifestations in appropriate ways. The role of emotional control lies in better understanding of the circumstances and in an individual's ability to understand how emotions act in situations.

The stated authors named several points through which leaders can contribute positively to the prevention of mobbing in organizations. Two of them are considered to be key points. The first point is **provision of the system of knowledge**, which employees need for a clear interpretation of the future events in the organization. The second point includes **subsequent measures** if the act of aggression already happened. The leader must help both parties, i.e. the victim but also the mobbing person in a meaningful retrospect of events. The framework of a meaningful process in both points is the great responsibility of the leaders who want to manage aggressive behaviour. Other points are **supporting effective communication, training employees in developing empathy, building trust, putting emphasis on managing aggression, supporting personal and professional growth of employees**.

Preventive programmes in the area of mobbing in educational environments are specific by the fact that they are intended for a group of adults (teachers) and overlap several educational approaches: on the one hand, it is the andragogical concept of life-long education which also includes the area of self-education, on the other hand, it includes specifics of teachers' learning. Education of this target group should take into account the propositions presented by V. Prusáková (2004, p. 12), e.g. inciting to reflection, goal-setting on the basis of knowing the needs of the target group, choice of suitable methods as well as professionalism of adult education.

Certain specifics of the teaching profession from the point of view of gender should also be taken into consideration (M. Beneš, 2003, p. 187), since this profession is considerably feminized.

Prevention of mobbing and its solution could be realized within several institutions:

1. Faculties of education – in the form of post-graduate specialized innovative study;
2. Methodological – pedagogical centres and pedagogical – psychological counselling offices – in the form of further (life-long) education of teachers;
3. Schools and school facilities – in the form of various courses, instruction, training under the supervision of school psychologists.

From the perspective of this issue, however, we do not consider the institution in which this education will take place to be the most important, but rather its content in terms of the type or the style of education of teachers as a specific target group. These specifics lie, for example, in the fact that the teaching profession belongs to the helping professions and teachers are led to help students express their feelings, they are often in the position of those who can counsel, guide, which “forces” them to behave in the company of others so as not to admit their own weakness, helplessness when solving various personal problems. Those often involve the sense of one's own failure, when the teacher is not able to manage the situation on his/her own when he/she is discriminated, ridiculed – simply mobbed on the part of his/her colleagues. Since it is an area which deeply concerns human personality it seems to us as the most optimal to apply the so-called **experiential learning**, which should be performed in the form of socio-psychological training.

The English term experiential learning is derived from the term experience which expresses something that happens to one and has an effect on the mind and feelings or knowledge and skills. We can therefore mark experiential learning as learning from experience or as active learning, since each experience is connected with one's own activity and emotions, which accompany this activity and the experience resulting from it.

The term experiential learning is based on humanistic psychology which is strongly connected with “experiencing” or with “experience” and the name of this type of learning is derived thereof.

Experiential learning can be perceived either as a type of learning or as a process by means of which the participants do the following:

- they acquire deeper knowledge if the lecture also contains immediate experience of what is taught theoretically or by memorising already existing truths,
- they can recognise and reflect better their own emotions which accompany them while acquiring certain knowledge, skills and experiences related with that,
- they participate actively, and creatively while gaining knowledge and information on the basis of a direct contact particularly with other people,
- they gain experience on the basis of cooperation in smaller groups, which develops their cooperation and positively supports interpersonal relations, reduces the states of anxiety and apathy,
- they develop mainly social creativity since this learning is based on the divergent thinking, which requires connection of rational and intuitive thinking when solving problems creatively,
- they can be aware of their own attitudes, values or emotions, mainly through subsequent value reflection, the result of which should be a change of one’s own understanding, understanding of other people and of the outside world linked with the change of attitudes and behaviour,
- they can perceive and assess themselves and also others positively.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above data we consider the issue of mobbing and bossing as a serious and topical problem in school environments for these reasons:

- school environments create space for mobbing (typically female staff members, more intense emotional experiencing), but also for bossing (hierarchical arrangement of positions, dominance of rules and regulations);
- victims of mobbing and bossing are still afraid of solving their situation for fear of being dismissed (at present the number of teachers at schools is being reduced in connection with the number of students, schools are being displaced, the smaller ones disappear and the like), and therefore it seems to be necessary to apply various programmes both in under-graduate study of teachers and in various post-graduate study programmes not only at faculties of education but also in other workplaces involved – methodological-pedagogical centres, pedagogical-psychological counselling offices and the like.
- it also seems to be necessary to elaborate legislative measures which would clearly define what can be considered as mobbing and bossing in the workplace

and to incorporate these measures directly into the Labour Code and into the school rules. In view of administrative measures teachers should be informed where and how they can file their potential complaints;

- in order to solve this issue it would be necessary to involve also school psychologists, teachers should use the opportunity of psychological counselling and intervention;
- to strengthen the function of the so-called initiating teachers, who should also act as tutors in the adaptation process of beginner teachers and should help them with optimizing relations in the teaching staff;
- in the Slovak Republic the problem of violence at schools has not been solved comprehensively and it would be useful to find out the mutual connection between the occurrence of mobbing, bossing and bullying at schools;
- all the three types of violence have a common denominator which concerns negative consequences on the mental but also physical health of the victims;
- these consequences represent, mainly in the area of mobbing and bossing, also economic losses which are caused by decreased productivity, sick leave, costs of the medical treatment of resulting diseases, but also by fluctuation;
- in case of bullying it also includes negative consequences on the psycho-social development of victims and aggressors; the school is also responsible for the optimal development of the personality of the child and it is therefore responsible for preventing all indications of aggressiveness;
- the sense of security of each individual is an inseparable condition for creating a productive environment, for that reason the social climate of a school should ensure such an environment.

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