Human Rights and Democracy in Action

Pilot Projects on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

Addressing Violence in Schools

through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

FOCUS GROUP CONTENT ANALYSIS

REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

The focus group was conducted in Łomża, Poland on 18 December 2015. 16 education professionals and two researchers participated in the event. There were school heads, teachers, a school pedagogue, a psychologist and representatives of a non-government organization among the participants. Łomża is a city in the north-eastern Poland, approximately 150 kilometers from the capital city of Warsaw. It is one of the principal economic, educational, and cultural centres of north-eastern Masovia. It was chosen as a place for the focus group, because the generalized results collected in Łomża seem to be more representative for the whole country, rather than the results collected in the capital, which might be more diverse and polarized.

The interview was recorded with the consent of the participants and lasted 1 hour 40 minutes.The participants were active and engaged in the discussion. A full transcript of the focus group interview in Polish is available.

The focus group was aimed to find out the extent to which violence is a matter of concern in schools, the way different informants understand violence at school and activities schools undertake to address violence.

2. CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

The interview had a planned structure which followed 10 questions for a discussion:

1. How do you perceive the phenomenon of school violence over the last five years? Has it been changing (types, scale, dynamics, tendencies)?
2. What factors, in your opinion, primarily influence the types, spheres and scale of school violence?
3. What factors, in your opinion, prevent the phenomenon of school violence from spreading?
4. How important is prevention of violence for school policy and its everyday procedures?
5. What activities are undertaken at school in order to reduce the phenomenon of school violence?
6. What kind of support is available for schools in addressing school violence?
7. What kind of support will be useful for schools (teachers, students, parents) in addressing school violence?
8. What competences do teachers need to be effective in addressing school violence?
9. What forms of interventions would you propose as most helpful for the school to combat school violence? If you could chose only one principle/from of intervention, what would it be?
10. Other reflections and comments.

At the beginning of the Focus group the participants were informed about the Council of Europe activities in the sphere of education and the Pilot Projects on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. After that the participants learned about the project "Addressing Violence in Schools through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education", its aims and activities in partner countries. Finally, the aims of the focus group were introduced and the discussion started.

The general summary of the focus group:

1. How do you perceive the phenomenon of school violence over the last five years? Has it been changing (types, scale, dynamics, tendencies)?

In the opinion of informants, the phenomenon of school violence has been constantly present in schools.

Some of them think that the phenomenon has been spreading and changing its forms. The change of form is visible especially in the sphere of new information-communication technologies.

„The scale of the phenomenon is growing. There is more and more violence and it has been constantly taking on new forms. A new type of violence has appeared – a cyber violence. It didn't exist before, but now it is a frequently used form, because it is difficult for us, teachers, influence this kind of activities".

(School pedagogue)

Another group of teachers claim that the phenomenon is not spreading, although they recognize that a new type of violence (cyber violence) has appeared.

„(…) my impression is the following: if I compare two schools – the one that existed 14 years ago and the one that exists now – I do not see much difference from the perspective of school violence between them",

(Director)

„(…)I would not say that school violence has been growing. Of course, it depends on children that come to school in a certain year, at certain moment. At some periods there is more school violence and some years the level of violence is bit lower",

(Director)

„(…) I think that children remained the same. Well, maybe that violence from the cyberspace entered schools. But my children do not surf there too much, yet. That violence is the same as it used to be".

(Teacher)

The teachers, who claim that the scale of violence has been spreading, admit that more and more younger children demonstrate violent forms of behaviour, including physical violence.

„I can add, that nowadays this aggressive behaviour is increasing among younger children. Before, these forms of open aggressive behaviour was observable among older students. Now, even the first graders reveal not only verbal, but also physical aggression",

(Director)

„Especially among young children. They use this kind of aggression – not physical, but verbal, a lot of words".

(Teacher)

Teachers state that parents demonstrate acquiescence to violent behaviour of their children. *„(…) the acquiescence of the society has changed. In the previous version, parents were definitely against [violence]. They used to repeat that it is prohibited, they were observing and controlling it. But now it is not always like this. Parents often agree with the behaviour of their child in this sphere".*

(Teacher)

> 2. *What factors, in your opinion, primarily influence the types, spheres and scale of school violence?*

While answering the first question, the informants already started defining reasons of school violence.The opinion that everything depends on the family upbringing was the most common.Most teachers think that the main reason is a passive reaction of parents on the aggressive behaviour of their children.
„I wanted to say that aggression in a child depends to a large degree on the status of a family it comes from, this is the main reason",

(Director)

„(…) when we talk to parents, we must admit, that very often they perceive it as a positive feature of character. That it [their child] will be successful in life, that it is able to react when somebody is trying to abuse it. That it does not even try to establish cooperation with us to do something with it, sometimes they treat it as an attack".

(School pedagogue)

„(…) when I talk with parents and inform them about some problem, such as misbehaviour, they do not agree much, they always try find excuses for a child, they do not confess that this behaviour came out from the family environment".

(Teacher)

Informants point out that families are not able to educate children properly, that there is lack of established norms and rules of conduct in the families, that some parents are absent from families (they migrate for work), leaving the childcare to grandparents.

„parents are overworked, they do not have time and they expect schools take over their duty to teach children how to behave",

(Teacher)

„migration of parents, children are left with grandmothers, grandfathers, who are not able to deal with the situation. I think this is one of the reasons of such state of art. Parents are seldom at home, they went abroad, they contact with children by telephone. There is a lack of constant care",

(School pedagogue)

„the cheapest way to take care is to place a child in front of a TV or a computer. All those programmes. Parents do not have time for conversations with children, to control them, neither do grandmothers. And the child is sitting and watching cartoons which are overloaded with violence",

(Director)

„Borders are not clearly defined for children at home. They do not know the limits of tolerance to evil, there are no clear rules what is allowed and what is not allowed for them. Children do know how far they can go in those actions."

(Teacher)

Frustration caused by unsatisfied material needs is also regarded as the reason of violence.
„if a family is unable to satisfy basic needs of a child, it causes frustration. The child is envious that other children have something that he/she does not have and feels torn".

(Teacher)

Another reason according to the informants is a negative influence of social media, especially aggressive messages and comments that can be found there.
*„(…) I've started noticing in our small environment this kind of verbal aggression that you can find in social media, such as Faacebook, Nasza Klasa (*Polish social network*), pictures, comments",*

(Parent)

„the reason of violence is that it is shown in abundanceby media and lack of defined borders that used to be before".

(Parent)

Teachers also say that children with diagnosed developmental deficits and disorders behave aggressively.

„aggression which is the most difficult for us to deal with, I mean aggression which is caused by medical disorders, it concerns autistic children, children with Asperger syndrome, children that are treated in mental health centres. (…) I see there are more and more those children, that are treated in mental health centres".

(Director)

There was also an opinion, that teachers' behaviour and their incompetence in building relationships with students is one of the reasons of school violence.

„it isalso a fact that we, teachers induce aggression among students. By assessment, by relations. And we are often inconsistent in our reactions, one of us says one thing, the other says something different and the child does know what to do. Something is possible with one of us, while with the other one it is not possible, but something different. It is an inconsistent impact".

(Teacher)

3. *What factors, in your opinion, prevent the phenomenon of school violence from spreading?*

The informants believe that student's active engagement in some constructive activities reduces the level of school violence.

„when children (…) are busy with different positive activities, projects, discussions, when their activity is directed on a good track",

(Parent)

„obligatory additional tasks, prevention programmes, extracurricular activities for children, where they can develop their self-esteem",

(School psychologist)

Determining and keeping the rules is regarded by the group to be an effective preventive measure.

„(…) consequent attitude is also important, because inconsequent reactions lead to violence. Rules set by children and with children. These rules should be simple and clear for children. They should be followed by both sides – by children and by adults",

(Teacher)

Teachers think that violence can be reduced if the content, available through media and Internet is controlled.
„Better control over cyberspace, that is explored by children, checking, if children watch what they should watch at school and at home."

(Teachers)

A lot of participants expressed an opinion that positive attitudes of teachers, friendly and safe school climate that they create can prevent school violence.
„if we make sure that students feel at home at school, aggressive forms of behaviour go down",

(School psychologist)

„if we create a friendly atmosphere at school, if a student willingly comes to school, he or she identifies herself/himself with a school, then such a student will be thinking more positively about herself/himself and about other schoolmates.There will be more tolerance and less aggression",

(Teacher)

„we are obliged as schools, we also have to explain children that their make harm to somebody".

(Director)

4. How important is prevention of violence for school policy and its everyday procedures?

All teachers agree that prevention of violence is a fixed target and a permanent feature of school documents, everyday procedures and educational programmes.
„it is a constant element of our educational plans and preventive programmes",

(Director)

„this issue is very important, because we have a safety coordinator at school, we were writing an evaluation report, the safety at school has been checked".

(Director)

Only one voice was not in line with the above mentioned opinion. It suggested that the preventive measures are mechanical and routine. They do not reflect actual needs and they are not evaluated.

„I think that everyone at school should think together, how we treat it – do I pay attention to it or just rewrite from one document into another?".

(Teacher)

5. *What activities are undertaken at school in order to reduce the phenomenon of school violence?*

The answers of informants to this question were very general and unclear. There were no examples of concrete activities. Even though, there were no much statements and answers to this question.

One participant recalled an external project, probably coordinated and implemented by anon-governmental organization.

„we had additional workshops (…) and lessons for students, and we had field trips – a lot of different activities. And it made a difference. I remember that was an external financing, so parents were eager to participate",

(Director)

It was also mentioned that there are more and more opportunities to learn how to address school violence.

„we have more and more different activities, we improve our competences, we learn, we try".

(NGO representative)

6. *What kind of support is available for schools in addressing school violence?*

Answering this question the participants mentioned different institutions, such as police, social welfare centre andpsychological support services.

„We cooperated with the social welfare centre",

(School pedagogue)

„We have been cooperating with the police. They come to meetings, they talk how to behave with strangers, about drugs",

(Teacher)

„We apply to Alcohol Fund to organise winter and summer holidays for our students",

(School pedagogue)

„… and the psychological support centre, I received support from a psychologist".

(Teacher)

7. *What kind of support will be useful for schools (teachers, students, parents) in addressing school violence?*

Teachers think that additional trainings will be useful:

„trainings that will help us to use effective methods, to improve effectiveness of conflict resolution",

(Director)

„a teacher has to know instruments that eliminate violence and aggression. This is what they do not have, this kind of training".

(Teacher)

At the same time teachers would like to have a full time psychologist at schools.

8. *What competences do teachers need to be effective in addressing school violence?*

The members of the focus group agreed that teachers' personality is very important in effective addressing school violence.Then they explained that it is about building authority and being consequent.
„ability to build authority and maintain discipline",

(Teacher)

„we often forget that our authority is not granted just because we are teachers, we need to work hard for it",

(Teacher)

Competence to model positive values, attitudes and dispositions that are expected from students was also regarded to effective in addressing school violence:
„each teacher is a human being as well and make mistakes, we have different weaknesses. But we have to be good role models for our students",

(Teacher)

„personality is very important in all kinds of relationships. We do not take into consideration that children behave as we behave. And it is a distorting mirror if we do not follow certain rules, but demand that from our students",

(NGO representative)

There was also an opinion that transmission of knowledge is not effective in addressing school violence and teachers should know how to use a competence-based approach.
„we say that we have school rules and children know them very well. But sometimes we know something, but understand and acquire something different. Because knowing and understanding are two different things".

(School psychologist)

9. *What forms of interventions would you propose as most helpful for schools to addressschool violence? If you could chose only one principle/from of intervention, what would it be?*

The informants were not able to describe concrete examples of intervention. Cooperation was regarded to be the most important principle, but the Focus group member also spoke about a human-based approach, knowledge and understanding of an issue of violence. The most frequent answers were:
„cooperation with parents",

(Director)

„cooperation in its broad meaning",

(Teacher)

"cooperation with students",

(Teacher)

„teacher's authority",

(Parent)

„understanding of a problem",

(School psychologist)

„love".

(NGO representative)

10. Other reflections and comments.

At the end of the meeting the participants referred to different aspects of the phenomenon that was analyzed.

There were voices, that school, as an environment is oppressive and generates institutional violence. The reason was seen in the organization of the system of education as a whole.
„Our Polish school is very stressful for our students. And all this stress and frustration that they are not able neither to meet expectations of teachers and parents, nor to fulfil their own aspirations, causes aggression",

(Director)

„parents complain, that they have children in the second grade of primary school and they have to sit 2 hours every day doing homework. That is why they are frustrated",

(Teacher)

„the amount of homework is horrifying. Children do not have time to go out and play",

(Parent)

„too many reforms in the system of education, they've been experimenting too much on children",

(NGO representative)

„Who was developing the core curriculum? Is it not related to the stages of education at all. And the subject curricular are overloaded".

(Director)

The participants also expressed an opinion, that it is very important to speak out about the problem of school violence. It is not possible to pretend that it does not exist. What is remarkable, one of the teachers said that there should be a transversal approach to the problem of school violence, meaning that all teachers are responsible for dealing with it on all lessons:

„we must not say: "I don't have this problem in my school". This problem is everywhere. There are always problems. And one classroom hour a week is not enough to deal with this problems. We should deal with problems on every lesson".

(Teacher)

The informants agreed that a lot depends on teachers and their attitudes:

„Teachers can do a lot. We have power, we can do a lot in this field (…),if we start educating children from the early age, we can achieve something".

(Teacher)

Clear school rules, which are well known and respected by everyone – students and teachers, was named as an important success factor:

„Agree on rules and follow the rules –us and them, and then we can achieve a lot".

(Teacher)

And finally, cooperation with parents was mentioned once again and it was stressed, that it is a key factor that reduces the level of school violence.

„there is a problem how to reach parents and how to make them aware: you are the first teachers, and this is the first role, and this is your responsibility, we are professionals (to help). If they understand this, a lot of problems and misunderstandings disappear",

(Teacher)

„Parents come to school and look at it (the issue of school violence) through the perspective of their own experience. We ask them sit at the desk and they have visions of their school experiences, they recollect their own frustrations",

(Teacher)

„Parents do not respect teachers as they used to. Because there are different teachers. We are professionals of different categories. Students observe very well and notice it very quickly. They bring it home and parents do not trust teachers",

(Teacher)

„We should know, what kind of family environment our students live in".

(School pedagogue)

11. CONCLUDING POINTS

After the general analysis of the collected information we have defined several spheres for further development.

First of all, the informants tend to **misunderstand the phenomenon** of violence. The participants used the terms aggression and violence interchangeably. All forms of aggressive behaviour were considered as violence and the power relation or unequal forces were not considered at all. Bulling, as an extreme form of violence was not mentioned. Behaviours of perpetrators and victims were often mixed and misinterpreted. For example, a typical aggressive behaviour of a victim was considered to be violent. Students with development deficits, that need special support and care were regarded to be violent and problematic. Students, who do not obey teachers and misbehave were also regarded as violent.However, although all kinds of the behaviour are problematic, preventive and reactive measures should be different in each case. Taking into account the above mentioned phenomenon, it is important to support teachers and develop their ability to differentiate aggression, violence and bulling in order to plan and implement relevant educational approaches to deal with the problem.

Teachers have a clear expectations of the accepted forms of students' behaviour at school. Unfortunately, it is difficult for them to accept various kinds of difficult behaviours of their students which are the reason of their stage of development. It is very important for teachers to receive a clear understanding, what forms of behaviour are socially dangerous and demoralizing (violence, bulling), because preventive and reactive measures in this case should be completely different than in other cases.

The major reason of school violence was regarded to **be external**. The informants mentioned improper family upbringing and social inequality. What is interesting, children that come from poor families were often categorized as violent. The other reasons of school violence, such as gender, homophobia, xenophobia, racism and other prejudices were not mentioned at all.There is an impression, thatwhile explaining the reasons of school violence, some of the members of the focus group were driven by stereotypical perceptions.It seems that

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trainings about stereotypes and discrimination for teachers may influence positive changes in the situation.

Teachers also tend to see family situation and upbringing as the cause of violent behaviour of students. While trying to address this problem, teachers seem to talk with family members from the position of fault finding and moralisation. We could presuppose that during such conversations various communication barriers occur, which make funding common understanding even more difficult. Generation gap also make the conversations more difficult, because we have noticed a certain tendency, when less and less younger teachers work in schools and the majority of teachers are older than parents.

Since teachers tend to find faults in external conditions, they do not see their active role in addressing violence and justify their passive attitude. They expect some external specialists will be responsible for the issue and not many informants take responsibility for dealing with school violence by means of everyday regular measures. It is difficult for the teachers to admit the fact, that their own behaviour and the way the school is organized could be one of the reasons of violent behaviour. That is why they did not speak about changes in their behaviour or school culture. They would rather have a psychologist in a school that will deal with problem.

Teachers rarely think about and plan changes they can introduce in their own behaviour and the whole school culture. From our point of view, this is the sphere that they can influence a lot and the changes in these two spheres can reduce the level of school violence.

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