

INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract: *One of the risks arising from inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is the phenomenon of institutional violence. Using a qualitative approach, the research identifies the main forms of violence against children with SEN: refusal to accept them in school, educational neglect, exclusion from some activities and punishment. Some of the causes of victimization are: poor material resources, insufficient training and motivation of teachers to work with children, non-involvement of parents. The article proposes several measures to prevent the phenomenon of institutional violence against children with SEN in inclusive schools.*

Key words: *school violence, violence, institutional, inclusive schools, children with SEN*

1. Introduction

The school is a small universe that reflects the social hierarchy: power struggles, social practices, prejudices and discrimination based on sex, ethnicity, social background, so it is an environment for the development of violent behaviors.

In school violence can occur both at the objective level, officially recognized and reported, in which case the penalties can occur, and at a more subtle, symbolic, psychological level. Aggression against persons, against property, which in Anglo-Saxon literature is called 'bullying', falls into the first category. In The attitudes of marginalization, isolation, rejection

affecting school climate [10] fall into the second category.

Many cases of subjective violence are part of the figures that do not appear in official statistics. The enquiries on school violence and the statistics have different data.

Defrance [4] makes a distinction between the violence of the school as an institution and violence in school, that is non-institutional violence. School, by the legitimate authority exercised by teachers on students, creates tension, frustration and violence. In order to accomplish their objectives (instruction, education and professional training) school teachers need authority and discipline. The boundary between authority and abuse of authority,

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being fragile, can generate violence in the functioning of an institution, violence that is hidden and difficult to detect. Non-institutional violence includes violent behaviour of students. Apparently it is not related to teacher and educational context. In fact, it can be enhanced by institutional violence, creating frustration, preparing the psychological state of transition to act, lowering the criminal threshold.

The worldwide awareness for school violence is shown by the international research conducted on this theme. We will do a review of some recent studies on violence in schools.

In his book *School violence: a global challenge?*, Debarbieux [3] shows that the dominant representation of society is that school violence is increasing, especially in the urban periphery. The issues pursued are the following: the risks of manipulation or denial of the violence, ways of measuring violence in schools, the causes and the consequences of violence and the effectiveness of various programs and policies of violence prevention and intervention.

In a study published in the *Sociology of Education* there is an analysis of the effects of school organisation (student enrolment, student-teacher ratio, and students that benefit from different levels of teaching) on pupils' victimization. The research hypothesis is that schools with a small number of students and homogeneous levels of teaching will have a lower victimization rate because the social capital that students in these schools are exposed to increases. Social capital is understood as the relationships which generate benefits for the individuals by virtue of their belonging to social networks. Thus, schools with fewer students have a higher social capital because relations between students and teachers are closer, trust in adults increases, communication and

management discipline work better. The conclusions of the research are that by reducing the number of students in schools and by reducing the levels of teaching one can reduce the numbers of students that a teacher has to teach and also the victimization of students [5].

In a survey conducted in Mali parents and students recognize the following forms of psychological violence from teachers: insult or humiliation in front of the class, voluntary ignorance or negligence. Research reveals that psychological violence causes in the student a loss of self-confidence or of his confidence in school and leads to aggressive behaviour [1].

In 2004-2005, UNICEF and the Institute of Educational Sciences have conducted research on violence in schools in Romania. This research aimed to assess the dimensions of the phenomenon of violence in schools, to identify causes and factors that determine it by analysing the perception of different social actors. The study aimed to analyse the events of student-student violence, student-teacher violence and also teacher-student violence. Regarding the third form of the violence manifestation, this was recognized in the study by a rate of 30% of directors and school counsellors. Disruptive behaviour of teachers is manifested in various forms such as verbal abuse towards students, ironic attitudes, screams and swears, insults, non-objective evaluation, non-verbal aggression from ignorance or denial of attention to discriminatory attitudes towards students with a much smaller proportion recognizing even physical violence, which violates the rights of children [6].

The research conducted on violence in schools can lead to the conclusion that institutional violence is a denial of the right to quality education and has negative effects on children development. The most

likely victims of institutional violence are children with SEN, given the rather complex problems they experience.

The objectives of this research are to identify the forms of institutional violence against students with SEN, to identify the causes of these forms of violence and also to propose measures to reduce the victimization of this category of students.

2. Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in Iasi from May to December 2010. The research methods used were semi-structural interview, observation and documentation related to it. We interviewed 62 people from four different groups of actors involved in the process of inclusive education:

- professionals in the mainstream education system: teachers of inclusive schools, including school managers;
- professionals in the special education system: teachers and speech therapists;
- parents of pupils with SEN;
- social care professionals: inspectors from the Complex Evaluation Service (CAS) within the Department for Child Protection (DCP).

The interviewed subjects were chosen from the following institutions in Iasi: 8 inclusive schools, 2 special schools and DCP. The sampling method that we used was the "snowball". For example, I began interviews with teachers and they recommended me other members of the school staff.

The interview guide was developed after consulting the specialty literature. The questions in the interview guide were formulated precisely to represent 'finished tools' [11], but they were only indicative. I asked questions based on the conversational flow and listener reactions [9].

We took into account only part of the interview guide questions because this study is part of broader research aiming at the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education. By means of questions about the difficulties faced by teachers in their work with students we could find forms of violence they use and an explanation of behaviour. Parents were asked questions related to difficulties in the schooling of children, their expectations from teachers in school, actions that would help children adapt better to the school environment.

3. Forms of institutional violence against children with SEN

This research aims at identifying forms of institutional violence against children with SEN in the following three dimensions of life in the school:

- admission of children with SEN in inclusive schools;
- entry in the support program;
- pedagogical relationship.

3.1. Admission of a child with SEN in inclusive schools

According to the Romanian legislation, children with SEN, regardless of their problems, can apply to any school because the degree of disability is not directly related to forms of education available to every child [13].

However as underlined by the analysis of interviews not every school is ready to receive and to educate them. Thus, there are the following cases:

1. The admission of a child with SEN to a school is denied because the school does not have a team of specialists or because the child is not part of the area served by the school and classes already have a sufficient number of students. For this reason many children with SEN are faced

with changing many schools and going to schools located far away from home:

'There are children who are school travellers, they change 3-4 schools trying to find a team that is OK' (CAS specialist interview).

'I went to the School Inspectorate and there I was advised to choose a certain school, but it was not convenient because it was not in the neighbourhood. (...). When I went to that school the teachers used to reproach me ... why have you brought her here?' (parent interview).

In order to have their children admitted to schools parents hide children's problems or require support from the authorities:

'Parents tell us that children are not admitted in kindergarten or school and we tell them to ask the principal to write the reason why they do not accept the child (...). Then the child is admitted to that school, but I doubt that he is treated well.' (CAS specialist interview).

2. In other cases, the child's admission to a school is a compromise. He is admitted but in fact he rarely attends and comes to school mainly to socialize:

'The child is often formally admitted but in reality the child stays at home. They tell the mother to keep the child at home and he will be formally passed the class (...). Parents bring children to school from time to time' (CAS specialist interview).

3. Children with SEN are rejected in classes where the focus is on performance. Especially the primary school teachers who care about their reputation and want the parents to choose them over other teachers have a 'selected class':

'Teachers who have rejected my daughter are severe and very good but they were informed by the kindergarten (...) that she is hyperactive and then they realized they need to work more with her.' (parent interview).

4. When the child creates difficulties in school, teachers ask parents to transfer him/her to another school:

'I had pretty severe cases when the teacher took the child out of class because he is deficient (...). Problem solved ... by sending the child to another school' (support teacher interview).

3.2. Organizing a support program

Under the law, children with SEN receive educational services through the system of teacher support in mainstream schools. In reality the following situations are encountered:

1. Only a few children can be provided with these services as a support teacher is in charge of teaching 8-12 children. The children who have a certificate of disability, who were advised by a school orientation authority and primary school children have priority to admission to the support program.

Thus sometimes it happens that children have special programs in primary school and then they are treated as if they had overcome their difficulties and were able to deal with the demands of the mainstream curriculum. For this reason, some students who attended primary school in a mainstream school go then to a special school.

2. The child has difficulties with many subjects and he/she has special programs only in Romanian and Maths classes:

'My daughter has tailored programs only for Romanian and Maths, she cannot learn Physics, Chemistry because she does not understand... she depends on the mercy of teachers to pass the class' (parent interview).

3. The child does not attend some classes to go to the office of a support teacher because the support program is scheduled during school hours. *'They are deprived of certain knowledge taught by the class*

teacher. This support is given during classes' (inclusive school manager interview).

'The support teacher takes the child from the classroom and works with him in the office using tailored programs. In the classroom the lesson is taught as usual and the child is confused' (inclusive school teacher interview).

3.3. Teacher Relationship

In mainstream schools the main role in the inclusion of children with SEN belongs to the class teacher. He must organize the class and design the teaching strategy so that all children acquire a minimum of knowledge. From the pedagogical point of view the solution is differentiated and work individualised. This implies that there is some time in each class devoted to children with SEN where they are checked while other students should work without the teacher's help [2]. In fact, there are the following situations:

1. The first risk is their educational neglect. Even if there are tailored programs the teachers do not always work with them. Thus, the student is not taught properly at his level of understanding and does not receive adequate stimulation. In such situations, he is placed in a position to copy from the blackboard and he is forgiven when he does not do his homework:

'The difficulty is not in the program that is done with the support teacher but in the fact that the children have different levels of handicaps and the fact that you have to do everything in the compulsory program (...). When I forget to give them special homework, I do not make a fuss if they work less' (inclusive school teacher interview).

Many children with SEN are promoted when they do not have problematic behaviour. Teachers give students passing

grades if they write in their notebooks and portfolios:

'She has a beautiful notebook and the teachers give her grades on this (...). The portfolios are present today and for every subject she did something' (parent interview).

As to this category of children, the attitudes prevailing in the teachers is undervaluation. This creates two effects: one of labelling, assuming that they are incapable of learning and an effect of demobilization of the people around the child who stop looking for ways to help him progress [7].

2. Another danger is that of forcing them to be on the same level with their classmates. Their progress is not considered because it is compared with other children in the class. So they are discouraged and have no self confidence:

'She is not allowed a longer time (...) the tailored program is not respected (...). When she is assigned special homework it takes a lot to do it (...). She often tells me she is tired of school, she does not want to go to school anymore' (parent interview).

'There are many children who have an extremely distorted self-image (...). With this inferiority complex (...) he has no courage to answer' (support teacher interview).

3. Children with SEN are excluded from extracurricular activities because they create problems:

'They avoided taking her to camps or on trips because she was agitated. In the end, at graduation, they didn't take her with them (...) and I was very upset' (parent interview).

P. Merle [8] speaks of two forms of discouragement produced by teachers: explicit and implicit. The first form of discouragement is expressed through public action such as direct criticism addressed to the student. In the second case

the teacher does not clearly express the intention of discouraging. This is done indirectly by exclusion from certain school activities, indifference and marginalization. For example, teachers are interested only in helping good students, capable of performance, eager to learn and they neglect those who need support.

4. In other cases children with SEN are punished because teachers do not find other ways to establish order in the classroom and create a good learning environment.

'My daughter was punished harshly by the kindergarten teacher because she was agitated, she did not speak but she was making the other children agitated.' (parent interview).

Rejecting of the children with SEN, neglecting the child, forcing them to reach the level of the other children, punishing them are forms of institutional violence that were identified in interviews.

4. Causes of institutional violence

Processing information derived from interviews enabled us to identify the following causes underlying institutional violence against children with SEN:

1. Working with children with SEN generates stress for teachers who are not sufficiently prepared to work with them. They do not know how to deal with behaviour disorders or how to pay attention to these students and maintain at the same time a good learning environment in the classroom. They must be flexible in order to work with heterogeneous collective of students and to use modern methods of teaching and assessment based on interaction and cooperation among students:

'The biggest problem is that elderly teachers do not have enough information to cope with this new type of education (...). Traditional methods

do not work anymore' (support teacher interview).

2. There is still a tendency to send the children that cannot adapt to special schools or to make them stay in the same grade for several years.

'The teachers think they are stupid...they don't even allow them to be promoted to another grade...I show them what the child knew at the beginning of the year and what he learnt...so the child cannot stay in that grade for another year' (support teacher interview).

3. Teachers are not motivated to work with such children. A pupil with SEN involves individualized tasks, and this is perceived by the teacher as an unpaid work. They expect a financial reward similar to that of teachers working in special education:

'Primary school teachers who work with such children are not motivated (...), and some say that considering the money they receive they should not work. Because a teacher who has a child with SEN (...) he must work on 3, 4 levels' (inclusive school teacher interview).

4. The assessment is based today on the very good results of schools obtained for admission to high school, diplomas for school competitions etc. apart from considering the effort that the inclusive schools do to work with disadvantaged students. In addition there is pressure from many parents who demand very good results:

'A teacher who helps children for school contests receives a point for each stage of the contest, more points than one who worked two, three, four years with children with SEN (...). That one has received a point for all the years. The work with children with special needs is far more difficult. Why work? It is better to prepare a child for a contest (...)

because you get points and fame' (support teacher interview).

5. Teachers complain about lack of parental involvement because most families delegate children education to school or the school must do everything for the child:

'80% of them have family problems ... I had no family support ... uneducated, disorganized family, school regarded as something useless' (inclusive school teacher interview).

6. The money given to schools that choose the inclusion of pupils with SEN is insufficient. For this reason there are less specialists than needed, there are too many pupils in a class and schools do not take into account the legal provision that the number of children must be diminished. In addition there are no teaching aids or office supplies:

'You need a lot of worksheets to teach children and integration has not been taken into account when they fixed the budget' (inclusive school manager interview).

As reflected in the study, insufficient material resources, lack of training and motivation of teachers, non-involvement of parents are some of the causes which led to the phenomenon of institutional violence against children with SEN. When these causes are interrelated there is a higher risk of vulnerability.

5. Institutional measures to prevent violence

To prevent institutional violence against children with SEN we consider the following measures as necessary to adopt:

1. Schools must be provided with teachers that are trained and motivated to acquire:

- an appropriate attitude towards inclusion, acceptance of diversity, non-

discrimination, flexibility, respect for partnership, empathy, responsibility [12];

- a realistic view about integration issues: being aware of the physical and socio-cultural characteristics of children with special needs, they must make individual intervention projects, develop tailored educational programs for each child and achieve student evaluation taking into account their progress;

- the ability to maintain a good learning environment in the classroom by designing individualized projects for the students, organizing the classroom according to areas of interest, focusing on cooperative learning possibly through involvement of NGOs.

2. Schools must have an optimum number of students per class to achieve individualization of education and pay attention to all the needs of the children.

3. Socio-educational services must be organized and developed to help students with SEN.

4. Partnerships with parents must be developed and they must be persuaded to get involved in school life.

5. Another system of evaluation of schools must be created in order to emphasize the progress made by children and not just results that are above average.

6. There must be effective collaboration at inter-institutional level implying the development of team spirit for all those involved in school inclusion so as to ensure the consistency and the continuity of the inclusion.

6. Conclusions

The inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon that is a challenge for schools and society. In recent years progress has been made regarding the inclusion of pupils with SEN in

mainstream schools especially in the legislative field.

Research has shown that inadequate material resources, poor organization of the work of inclusion, and poor preparation of schools to accept children with SEN are causes that give rise to forms of institutional violence against these children.

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