

THE RISK OF PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AT RUSSIAN SCHOOLS: SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Received 8 February, 2014

Accepted 29 March, 2014

doi:10.13165/SD-14-13-1-03

Abstract

Competent international organizations are greatly concerned with the prevalence of aggressive behavior of children in Russia. This paper addresses the frequency and types of school violence in present day Russia. The study evaluated 14 factors of violence at school, relevance of which is proved by modern research. This sociological study, which is the first large-scale research on the issue in Russia, has confirmed that violence is embedded in the country's cultural patterns and can be found in all the components of school life. The study has provided evidence that, firstly, violent behavior is prone to change over time and depends on the school's culture. To what extent a contemporary Russian school may be regarded as a safe place largely depends on the social capital and the origin of the majority of students, as well as the level and quality of social control exercised by intraschool structures, and the interaction involving all the participants of school life. Not least of all, the spread of violence in school is associated with a considerable deterioration in the quality of school teaching and educational capital, a sharp reduction in social contacts and relationships with key persons responsible for the school's socialization of children (e.g., parents). Secondly, along with other factors, the social capital of the family and the kind of information and communication the children are exposed to determine what forms the aggressive behavior of children takes. It may depend on a high degree of vulnerability of

the family and a tough style of family upbringing of children, comprising the use of physical punishment, abuse and inclusion of children in the orbit of the parent/partner conflicts and scandals. It is equally important to protect children from the flow of harmful information and unsafe communications. On the contrary, the violence among students in Russia is depending to a lesser extent on factors, such as the infrastructure of the school, its spatial characteristics, motivation of children to learning and to school attendance, attitudes and internalization of social norms and ideological components, relationships with parents, the experience of tasting forbidden narcotic and psychotropic substances and the existence of negative life experiences.

Keywords: *violence, aggressive behavior of children, school climate, family socialization, mass media and communication, social vulnerability and deprivation.*

Introduction

The Russian research literature on violence includes only a few studies with the focus on sociological aspects of this problem. This topic has normally been the subject of psychological or educational research. In Europe and in the world, the study of school violence since the end of the 20th century has been predominantly the object of interdisciplinary and cross-national research (Denmark *et al.*, 2005; Henry, 2009). It reflects the complexity of the phenomenon under study, the need to study the whole complex set of causes and effects at different levels (Muschert, 2007) in an intercultural space. In general, the results of modern integrated analysis of school violence can be reduced to a thesis that genetic inclinations, and especially the development of the body and the mind of the child, under certain circumstances contribute to the choice of action in favor of antisocial behavior. The scholars often refer to such circumstances as an aggregate of social problems (Barak, 2003) that affect the institutional, structural and interpersonal spheres, mutually depend on each other and create a cumulative effect for the development of a culture of violence or non-violence. Contemporary sociologists are more interested in the social origin of children, the socialization of children in the family, the impact of mass media, the social and cultural context of the child's life and systems of social control. Thus, they investigate the experience and various practices (forms) of school violence, socio-cultural and economic factors, which help to describe a wide range of activities from which a more explicit violence arises (Morris, 2005; Windham *et al.*, 2005; Waldron, 2009). In particular, both classical and contemporary sociologies interpret violence as a consequence of anomie (Durkheim, Merton), which leads to the "culture of permissiveness" (Sztompka, 2007). Sweeping changes in the Russian society of the 1990s, though incomplete, together with the poor social control and unpreparedness of the country to adopt a new way of life have resulted in numerous "functional disorders" leading to deviations. The society tolerated them when various deviant behaviors were seen as attempts to meet the challenges of a novel social situation. A number of certain violent cultural patterns have always been embedded in the Russian school system, e.g., flogging pupils in tsarist Russia and, in the Soviet era, the focus on socializing children outside their families, i.e., within the school system, which often failed to cope with the task. Therefore, a school in Russia has never been an entirely "friendly environment" for the students (Meyer, 2009). The transformation of the Russian society has affected the school. Its function has been reduced to fulfilling the single task of teaching children. Nowadays, there are no ideological organizations for youngsters to replace pioneers

and Komsomol, which used to provide a range of educational and leisure activities and events for children and adolescents. The system of hobby circles, study groups and clubs for children remains underdeveloped, those existing being marginal. Upbringing and socialization of the younger generation have again become the responsibility of the family that is increasingly experiencing the pressure of democratization (Castel, 1995) and socio-economic problems, which lead to vulnerability. In such "struggle for life" conditions children are often neglected.

Simultaneously, the school itself is specified as a new object of study of violence against children (Cornell, Mayer, 2010). Russia is facing a dramatic decline in school teaching capital. Currently, the teaching staff in Russian schools may include both experienced highly skilled teachers and those with varying levels of teaching skills, most schools being understaffed with school psychologists and social workers. Besides, the system of school medical facilities is in decline. School administration and teachers are expected to be learning new skills in the field of school management and/or reporting, while taking care of students is being disregarded. The process of Russian school system transformation has weakened social contacts between the main actors of school life. In particular, a close interaction of parents and close relatives of the students with the school staff and teachers is now lacking. As a result, the inattention to the private side of children's life restrains the ability of schools to ensure full safety of the children.

As a consequence, the school has become a fertile ground for violence as this social institution "imbibes" problems resulting from the social vulnerability of students and teaching staff, lack of societal values, family decline and social disintegration, the uncertainty regarding the goals and methods of education, weak parenting style, low social control of behavior and lack of self-control. Children come to school with their negative social experience and their response to adversity, have serious difficulties regarding self-identity and often hold values of subcultures.

1. The Concept and Methods

In 2012-2013, Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod (UNN) implemented a project on "Violence as an Everyday Pattern of Behavior in Russian Schools: An Analysis of Socio-cultural Roots of Violence". Under the project, a mass questionnaire survey of pupils was conducted. The methods and techniques of the panel study on school violence were employed, conducted by German researchers in three waves (between 1994 and 2004) in the state of Bavaria (Fuchs & Lamnek, 2009).

The survey on school violence in Germany relied on a wide range of concepts. The study in Nizhny Novgorod focused on identifying the incidence and prevalence of aggressive behaviors of children, as well as on the influence of social background, social setting, school climate and social control on students' behavior. The purpose of this article is to identify the level and forms of violence in a contemporary Russian school and to emphasize the socio-cultural factors contributing to the reproduction and development of violence among students, which follows from the most significant material obtained in the course of the sociological research. These factors include, above all, a low social origin and a tough style of upbringing of children in many families of Nizhny Novgorod, an inefficient system of social control over the manifestation of violence by school structures and an unrestricted access of children to media resources containing harmful information.

Social vulnerability tends to reproduce itself in younger generations and influence their life chances. The role behavior of the members of a particular group with certain features of a subculture is transmitted to other social institutions, such as school, because today, for most children, school is virtually the only place for organized activities. Also, it is school where children bring their experience of family socialization. This experience contributes to the development of their attitudes and behaviors, which may include violent behaviors and/or victimized behaviors. The development of youngsters' self-identity and their behavior are greatly influenced by the media environment. This impact can be negative unless its dangerous impulses (Fuchs & Lamnek, 2009, p. 178) are controlled by family or other socialization institutions.

To investigate the impact of the social control and the components of school life, the German project adopted Foucault's theory, which sees the human body as an object to be manipulated and trained (Foucault, 1995). While in school, a student interacts with his classmates and teachers, sometimes coming in conflict with them. This process is regulated by formal and informal rules of behavior in school. Violence can result from the predominance of norms and values of a particular social group most students belong to. They may gradually become "the norm" of school life not only for informal interaction between students, but an everyday phenomenon for adults, as well. The key element of healthy school climate is adequate relations between children and teachers, e.g., mutual respect and trust. A student, who realizes that a teacher cannot protect children from acts of violence, is more likely to demonstrate similar violent behaviors. Moreover, a teacher, who tries to discipline the class by resorting to some forms of violence commonly found in school and accepted by students, contributes to the development of students' violent behaviors. Aggressive behaviors of children may be accompanied by other forms of misbehavior, ranging from playing truant to taking drugs. Thus, school capital (the accepted rules and norms of the interaction and methods of instruction enhancing the acquisition of knowledge) may either encourage acts of violence, or prevent violent behaviors.

The questionnaire employed in the Nizhny Novgorod study is a ready-made instrument for a mass survey of pupils aged from 10 to 21. It was successfully tested in Germany as an instrument for the panel study in schools in 1994, 1998, and 2004 (Fuchs & Lamnek, 2009). The original questionnaire was translated into Russian from German in compliance with the rules of translation for questionnaires. Besides, the questionnaire was assessed by independent experts of the Community Mental Health Care Center for Children and Adolescents in compliance with Article 185 "On Protecting Children from Information, Harmful to Their Health and Development" of the Law of the Russian Federation.

The main object of the survey were the students of the 5th-11th grades aged from 10 to 18, from three commonly found types of schools in Nizhny Novgorod: 1) secondary schools (ordinary schools with a standard set of school subjects), 2) *gymnasia* (a type of school in Russia, providing advanced courses in humanities) and *lycées* (with advanced courses in science), and 3) secondary schools with a number of advanced courses on their curriculum. The sampling was made on the basis of the official statistics regarding the number of students in eight city districts provided by the local school district authorities (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The distribution of the total student population by their number and type of school, numbers and per cent*

1 lentelė. Bendras mokinių pasiskirstymas pagal jų skaičių ir mokyklos tipą, skaičiai ir procentai

School type	Schools		Students	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Secondary schools	121	81	43707	75
<i>Gymnasia and lycées</i>	18	12	9057	16
Schools with a number of advanced courses on their curriculum	11	7	5203	9
Total	150	100	57967	100

The total student population analysis has shown that the types of schools in the city are distributed unevenly, most of the schools having been established in the Soviet period. Also, it has been found that some schools are short of pupils, while those enjoying higher reputation and prestige are overcrowded. The number of students in schools and in classes may vary greatly depending on the year of study. Recently, the number of students in *gymnasia* and *lycées* has grown dramatically, while the number of students in ordinary schools has been decreasing. There are more younger pupils in ordinary secondary schools, the number of the 5th grade students being the largest, while *gymnasia* and *lycées* have the largest number of students in the graduation classes (i.e., 9th and 11th grades). The number of students in schools with a number of advanced courses on the curriculum largely depends on the proximity of the school to the students' place of residence.

A representative sampling was achieved through the proportional representation of school's community, the characteristics of the total student population being taken into consideration. The location of the schools was taken into account, too, as they are segregated by their students' social background for there have always been the so-called "working-class" districts in the city. The selection of the similar types of schools and similar classes was performed randomly from the above mentioned lists, all the students in the class being interviewed. Using the multistage sampling (systematic probability, stratified, and nest sampling), 1500 students were selected, which makes about 3% of the total student population in the types of schools under the analysis in Nizhny Novgorod in September, 2012.

2. Results and Discussion

The survey in the schools was accompanied by an unstructured observation of the school life (Istomina, 2012), the results of which are discussed here. The present day Russian school may be regarded as a "closed" institution. There often has been the need to cut through "red tape" and face hostility of the school management regarding interference. It became a serious problem in the process of conducting the study. School administration was rigorously monitoring the process; there were even attempts to rule out "dangerous" questions to save their face or to prevent possible sanctions from the local education authorities. Such a policy

of a “closed organization” is not a result of corporate spirit in Nizhny Novgorod schools. In most cases, the principal makes decisions alone, while teachers and school personnel are hardly involved in the process. Quite often, one person (e.g., the class teacher) is held responsible for students’ violent behaviors and serious conflicts. Today, schools do not see teaching values of cooperation, empathy or the feeling of belonging to their school as their priority. The teaching staff is heterogeneous in terms of age and gender, their qualifications and expertise and their social background. The heterogeneity in the quality of the teaching staff and the schools under the analysis reveals itself in the polar ways of preventing violence, which may range from holding class meetings or organizing cultural activities and events to making undesirable students leave the school.

The sample consisted of 47% of boys and 53% of girls from Nizhny Novgorod schools. This demographic disbalance reflects the gender composition of the population in the European part of Russia. However, boys outnumbered girls among 13-15 year old students at the time of the survey, which enabled to adjust the study in general against the possible predominance of the “female view” of the problem. On average, 25% of students in each age group were interviewed, only 12 year old children made 37% of the sample. 60% of the respondents went to ordinary secondary schools, 21% attended *gymnasia* and *lycées*, 19% of the children interviewed were educated at schools with advanced courses on their curricula. When the survey was conducted, 68% of children lived in two-parent families, while the others lived in single-parent families, 79% of such families headed by mothers. There were only 7% of children of single-parent families headed by fathers in the sample. Children of single-parent families stood out from their fellow students: their families tended to have lower income than the families of their fellow students and they were more likely to demonstrate less academic achievement (the grades in three most important school subjects were taken into account – mathematics, the Russian language and a foreign language). Most of the children of single-parent families went to ordinary secondary schools. Nevertheless, this dependency has not been found for children of two-parent families, who were distributed evenly in all types of schools under the analysis. Thus, the family’s income greatly influences the parental choice of the type of school the child goes to (see Figure 1).

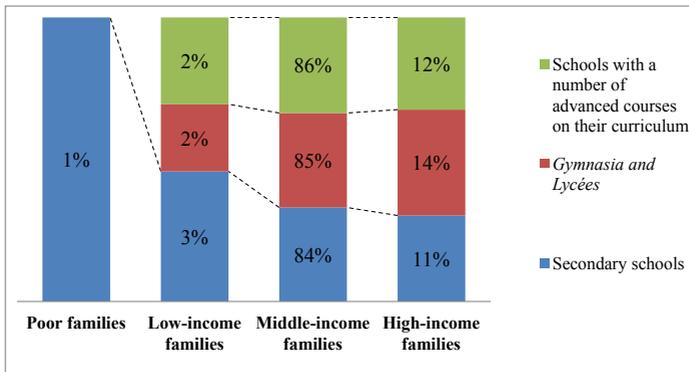


Figure 1. The dependency between the family income and the type of school
 1 pav. Ryšis tarp šeimos pajamų ir mokyklos tipo

In the course of the study, it was found that in Russia children from poor and vulnerable families concentrate mostly in ordinary secondary schools any child can be admitted to. Children from single-parent and needy families tend to have lower grades than the mean grade of the sample and the grades of advantaged children from two-parent well-off families. Also, the parental choice of the type of school highly depends on parents' employment and their education level, especially that of the mother (coefficient of correlation is 0.329). For example, parents of students from *gymnasia* and *lycées* are more likely to have university education (their number is twice as high as that of parents of students from ordinary secondary schools). Besides, the parents of students from ordinary schools were more likely to be out of work than those of children from academically superior secondary schools. Thus, the child's initial exposure to vulnerability has its roots outside the school. Low social background and changing family conditions determine the child's trajectory in the Russian school system. Concentration of children from low-status and deprived groups of the population in ordinary secondary schools has far-reaching consequences for prevalence of violence. For example, as the findings show, in Russia it is in secondary schools that children from socially disadvantaged groups concentrate, and the incidence of school violence is the highest. It is in secondary schools that the seven types of violence investigated (physical violence, severe physical violence, verbal aggression, emotional violence, violence against teachers, vandalism, extortion and stealing) have the highest possible values, while the lowest values are for *gymnasia* and *lycées*. It should be noted that in ordinary secondary schools the frequency of violence directly depends on students' age. A gradual growth in the frequency of violence and the changes in the types of violence are conjugate. For instance, physical violence in high school is less frequent, while stealing, extortion and vandalism occur more often. Evidently, without regular preventive measures, age and gender become the key factors determining the frequency of various types of violence. The situation is different for pupils from *gymnasia* and *lycées*, where the frequency of violence is "explosive" – barely noticeable with younger pupils, the incidence of violence skyrockets for 15 year old students of *gymnasia* and *lycées*, which needs further investigation.

The evaluation of school violence shows that aggressive behaviors of children is an everyday phenomenon in the Russian school system, and every student at least once participated in or was exposed to acts of violence. Traditionally, verbal aggression is more common in schools. However, physical violence and emotional pressure can be found there, as well. The acts of violence against teachers are a matter of great concern, too. Today, they occur as frequently as vandalism and stealing – the deviant behaviors, which have always been found among students in Russian schools. Figure 2 shows the general dynamics of violent behaviors in the sample by age. As can be seen, the period between 15-16 years (corresponding to 9th and 10th grades) is the most active phase of students' involvement in violent behaviors.

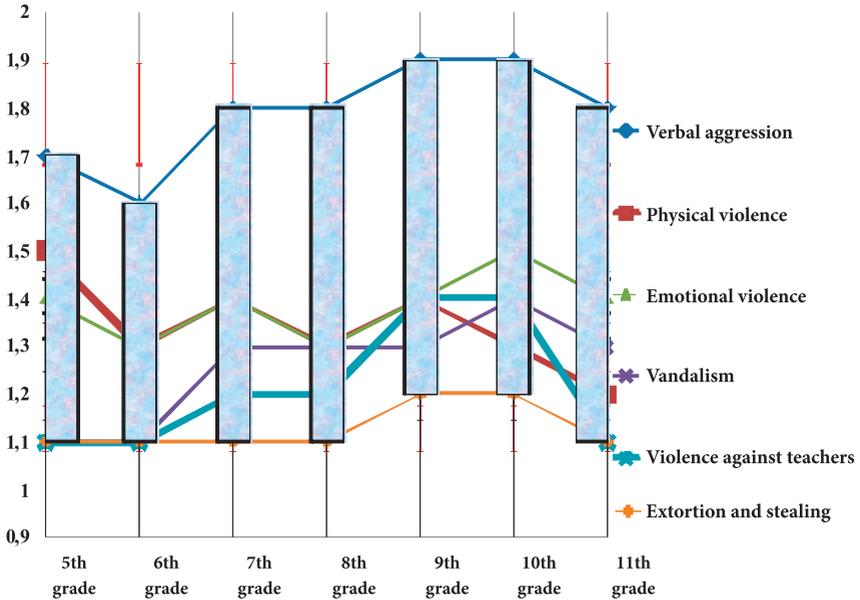


Figure 2. The dynamics of students' involvement in various types of school violence by age
 2 pav. Moksleivių įsitraukimo į įvairių tipų smurtą mokyklose dinamika pagal amžių

Note: 0 – have never been involved in violent behaviors; 5 – have been frequently involved in violent behaviors

A lot of children are not only perpetrators, but also victims of school violence. If the research results are extended to the total student population, it will be seen that, for example, a relatively small proportion of children (1% of the sample), who had to seek medical treatment as a result of having been beaten up, makes up, in fact, 754 students (standard deviation to either side does not exceed 3%). There are even more children, who are regularly threatened with a weapon (2%) or beaten up (2%), whose possessions are stolen (3%) or who are victimized by other types of violence.

Out of the most important social factors, determining the risk of prevalence of school violence in present day Russia, which were identified in the course of the study, the effects of the unhealthy school climate (the relationship between students and teachers), abusive parenting styles and the media are the most negative.

Students of Nizhny Novgorod schools did not give high grades while assessing their relations with their classmates, the students of ordinary schools giving low grades more often. However, in *gymnasia* and *lycées*, there are more students in class, who other children dislike. A poor relationship at school leads to the increase in verbal aggression, physical violence and vandalism among children. Also, the worse relationship the classmates have, the higher is the frequency of violence against teachers. In Russian schools, it is the teacher, who is held

responsible for most problems and conflicts in the class, so it is the teacher, who is most exposed to the poor relationship in class. The comparison of the violence prevention activities of the three actors of school life (teachers, school administration and students) shows that it is teachers, who are put in charge of preventing violence. Only 30% of violent acts are reported to the principal or discussed at the teachers' meetings, the other 70% either remain unreported to the school administration, or are given little attention. The children gave their teachers very low grades, which shows that the relationship between teachers and children is quite poor (rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good)). 77% of the respondents reported the relationship to be poor or very poor. In the analysis of the data collected, both variables regarding the relationship with teachers and fellow students showed significant statistical correlation with the frequency of violence in a particular school. Thus, to prevent school violence, experts and educators should focus on close cooperation of all the actors in the class and the school.

85% of the students of Nizhny Novgorod schools reported having a good or very good relationship with their parents. However, the data regarding the parenting style in the students' families show another picture of children's welfare in the family. 49% of the children believe that their parents have no definite parenting style, 16% assess it as "tough", and nearly 4% report their family keeping a tight rein on them and treating them strictly and unfairly. Only 1 out of 3 children reported being treated at home with care and love. It should be noted that students from *gymnasia* and *lycées* are more likely to be treated strictly in their families than students from other schools. Parents of children from ordinary schools tend to demonstrate loving and caring parenting style, which might be attributed to lower requirements to these students both at home and school. It should be noted that, though parents of students from *gymnasia* and *lycées* spoil their children less often, they resort to violence to discipline their children less frequently than the parents of the students from other schools. Often, a child, who is exposed to family violence, transfers his negative experience to his school life. For instance, the children in Nizhny Novgorod are physically punished for misbehavior either on a regular basis (8%), or from time to time (17%). One out of five students is at risk of being beaten at home for low grades at school (21%). 25% of the children have been beaten with a leather belt, which is a severe form of punishment. Besides, 29% of the children reported their parents having arguments, one in ten children reporting such arguments occurring regularly. On the other hand, approximately 40-45% of 5th-11th grade students are allowed to have and express their own opinion, develop their interests and act according to their needs. The factor analysis of the socialization of children in the family (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy making 0.793, it was applied to the subsample based on 10 items of the respondents) enabled to identify two prevailing styles (see Table 2).

The study of the impact of family socialization on the incidence and types of school violence shows that, undoubtedly, the experience of tough socialization in the family has consequences for the prevalence of students' aggressive behaviors, which is true for all the types of violent behaviors considered.

Table 2. The correlation between the type of violence and family socialization of children
2 lentelė. Koreliacijos ryšis tarp smurto tipo ir vaikų socializacijos šeimoje

Factors	Physical violence	Severe physical violence	Verbal aggression	Emotional violence	Vandalism	Stealing, extortion	Violence against teachers
Experience of tough socialization in the family	.295**	.297**	.241**	.187**	.233**	.291**	.188**
Positive experience of socialization in the family	-.038	-.061*	-.057*	-.046	-.060*	-.037	-.092**

Note: ** Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$

* Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$

The behavior patterns of school students and the growth in violent behaviors of children in Russia are often attributed to the influence of the media and communication. As the study in Nizhny Novgorod has shown, the media environment with dangerous content for child's mind affects the prevalence of school violence more often than other factors. Children, who have access to pornographic sites on the Internet, TV programs and computer games containing violence or horror, are prone to violent behaviors. The frequency of violence has skyrocketed because of such media projects, a lot of them designed for children or adjusted for child's mind. The analysis has shown that *what* the children watch or read matters more to the prevention of violence than *how much* time they spend in front of the computer or the TV.

Conclusion

The problem of violence in Russian schools, as earlier in Soviet schools, has never been the focus of public attention. Nowadays, when a laissez-faire attitude is taken towards child leisure (no children or youth organizations being involved) and the functions of raising children have become only the family's responsibility (family members often lacking the necessary skills), the risk of prevalence of violence among children and adolescents is especially high. Deviant behaviors accumulate in socially vulnerable, in terms of their social background, groups of children and are segregated into ordinary secondary schools, as these are available to everyone. Therefore, the school system accumulates social problems and the consequences of vulnerability and translates them through school life, thus, putting at risk children's life and health. It is necessary to preclude child's access to pornographic programs and violent or horror movies, which are often shown on main TV channels as prime-time programs, as they affect children's mind and behavior.

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SMURTO PAPLITIMO RIZIKA RUSIJOS MOKYKLOSE: SOCIOLOGINĖ ANALIZĖ

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojama smurto problema šiuolaikinėje Rusijos mokykloje. Rusijoje, kuriant naują visuomenę nuo 1990 metų, sustiprėjo socialinės problemos. Ypač pavojingos tendencijos pastaruoju metu yra visuomenės susisluoksniavimas ir dalies gyventojų socialinė atskirtis. Šioje situacijoje ypatingai pažeidžiami tampa vaikai, kurių socializacija vyksta tokiomis sąlygomis, kur nėra aiškių moralinių ir etinių orientyrų.

Pastaruoju metu Rusijos ir užsienio šalių visuomenėse vis dažniau diskurso objektu tampa auganti vaikų agresija. Rusijos mokykla, kaip svarbiausias vaikų socializacijos institutas, yra sunkioje padėtyje. Nesibaigiančios mokymo proceso reformos ir finansiniai sunkumai, sumenkęs pedagoginis kapitalas dėl visuomenėje žymiai sumažėjusio mokytojo profesijos prestižo atvedė šiuolaikinę mokyklą į sunkią padėtį. Esant tokioms sąlygoms mokyklose išaugo smurtas.

Šio straipsnio tikslas – atskleisti smurto šiuolaikinėje mokykloje lygį ir formas, išryškinti svarbiausius materialinius ir sociokultūrinius veiksnius, skatinančius smurto tarp mokinių raišką.

Pasirinkta kiekybinė tyrimo strategija, taikant apklausos raštu metodą (priemonė – klausimynas). Tyrime dalyvavo Nižnij Novgorodo 1500 penktų-vienuoliktų klasių mokinių, kurie sudaro 3 proc. bendrojo Nižnij Novgorodo regiono mokyklose besimokančių 5–11 klasių mokinių. Mokiniai buvo atrinkti atsitiktinės atrankos būdu. Apklausa vykdyta 2012–2013 m.

Tyrimas atskleidė, kad vaikai iš socialiai nepalankioje padėtyje gyvenančių šeimų (vargių, nepilnų, menkai išsilavinusių ir kt.) daugiausia mokosi vidurinėse mokyklose, kuriose labiausiai paplitęs smurtas tarp vaikų. Geresnė padėtis yra gimnazijose ir licėjuose, kuriuose daugiausia mokosi mokiniai iš pilnų, pasiturinčių, išsilavinusių šeimų.

Tyrimas atskleidė, kad smurtas – aktuali problema mokyklose: mokiniai yra bent kartą patyrę smurtą arba patys smurtavę. Daugiausia mokyklose paplitęs verbalinis smurtas, tačiau paplitęs ir fizinis bei psichologinis smurtas. Tyrimas atskleidė, kad pagrindiniai smurto mokykloje socialiniai veiksniai yra prastas mikroklimatas mokykloje, netinkamas, naudojant smurtą prieš vaikus, auklėjimo stilius šeimoje, žiniasklaida.

Siekiant mažinti smurtą mokykloje ypač svarbu spręsti vidinius konfliktus mokyklose, plėtoti socialinius ryšius ir bendradarbiavimą tarp visų subjektų, susijusių su mokyklos gyvenimu, plėtoti mokinių laisvalaikio užimtumą, įtraukiant mokinius į neformalią veiklą mokykloje ir už mokyklos ribų.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *smurtas, agresyvus vaikų elgesys, mokyklos klimatas, šeima, socializacija, žiniasklaida, socialinis pažeidžiamumas, nepritekliai.*

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