



PeerThink

**DISCUSSION ON PEER VIOLENCE AND
INTERSECTIONALITY IN SLOVENIA**

(Report)

by

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1. Peer violence in schools

In Slovenia systematic research on peer violence started in 1990s, a few years later than in some European countries where it started in late 1980's, and was focused solely on violence in school environment. In terms of institutional context in which peer violence was and still is treated in Slovenia, it should be noted that it consists of a quite narrow circle of experts from the fields of psychology, criminology and education. Faculty of Education, Institute for Criminology and the National Agency for Schooling are the leading expert institutions in the area. Several nongovernmental organizations are providing activist violence preventive projects and programmes, mainly for schools. Such institutional setting has been developing a specific framing of peer violence.

The first researches (Dekleva 1996) were focused on understanding of diverse terms used to denote the phenomenon of peer violence. It was established that the most appropriate term designating the phenomenon among pupils was the expression "trpinčenje" (torture) which mainly refers to physical forms of violence and only to a lesser extent to verbal/social abuse. Among experts the consensual expression is "ustrahovanje" (intimidation). The concept "bullying" (as it was defined by Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus) signifies researchers' and other experts' conceptualization of peer violence in Slovenia.

On theoretical level two approaches towards understanding peer violence can be discerned. In relevant literature individual and psychopathological approaches according to which violence is linked to specific personal features and to specific family background of pupils involved in violence are prevalent (Dekleva 1997, Pušnik 1999). Researches indicate partially different characteristic of bullies and their victims. However, according to some authors these differences are almost negligible and cannot explain the phenomenon of bullying very well. This approach puts stress on the child and his/her family and turns the attention away from the context in which violence occurs and also away from the more profound structural causes. Although it is recognized that individual and psychological approaches do not represent a firm ground for planning intervention strategies, it remains in frequent use within expert circles as well as in public discussion and common sense. Another theoretical source for understanding peer violence derives from a more sociological position. The latter defines peer violence as a

normal social phenomenon in Durkheimian sense according to which violence has its function and meaning and above all it speaks up something. Hence, however, it does not follow that violence is acceptable, but rather that it represents a common element of the relationship dynamics (Dekleva 1996). This approach offers a more systemic understanding of violence and is not focused on isolated (pathological) individual. This theoretical background is echoed by the violence preventive projects pursuing to set up a safe school environment. Some signals of a more structural/intersectional approach could be detected in some recent studies on peer violence (Lešnik Mignianoni 2004, Dekleva, Razpotnik 2002, DNK). However, a clear articulation has not been offered yet. For example, Lešnik Mignianoni (2004) stated that the most important factors that run into risk of peer violence are attitudes toward violence in society and culture - affiliation to some social groups, such as ethnic, racial, cultural, religious and social marginal groups; and being a child, a woman, a handicapped, a homosexual and an old person; and also growing differences in socio-economic positions, poverty, etc. Close to this definition stands the point of departure, which forms the fundamental ground for developing violence preventive projects of *Association against violent communication* (DNK), namely that violence is always the outcome of inequality in power (here the stress is not on physical but on social, cultural and economic hegemony).

Research on peer violence (methodologically the Olweus questionnaire was applied) carried out in Slovenian schools in the period from 1995 to 1997 showed following picture:

- elementary schools had 21,5% of peer violence victims, while secondary schools enumerated 8% of peer violence victims.
- in elementary schools 12,5% of pupils were violent, while in secondary schools there were 5,9% violent pupils (Pušnik, 1999).

Respective gender researches indicated that there are more victims and perpetrators among boys than among girls and that involvement in violent behavior decreases with age. However, an unexpected growth of experiencing bullying (according to the Norwegian results) was noted among boys in 3rd and 4th grade and among girls from 3rd to 8th grade. The researchers didn't offer any explanation for unusually high level of victimization of girls in higher grades. Among boys occurrence of physical violence is more frequent, while the occurrence of indirect forms of violence (such as slander, exclusion from group, etc.) is more frequent with girls than with boys (Antončič, 2005). According to data of the *Association against violent communication* (DNK) carrying out long-term violence preventive workshops in elementary

and secondary schools on a regular basis, pupils perceive social and verbal violence more or less as non-violence, as a part of their peer culture. Data related to the type of secondary school showed that there is more peer violence in vocational schools than in gymnasium (Pušnik 1999). A review of respective literature showed that peer violence is depicted only through gender perspective (in terms of statistical frequency), while other social dimensions, such as class, ethnicity, age, etc. are mentioned only in the context of sensibilisation of various forms of violence. The interpretation of data does not offer any reflection on perception of different types of violence among youth. Besides, a critical standpoint on structural causes of peer violence has not been developed yet.

The main perception is that violence originates from intolerance, disrespect for others, introversion and is related to self and the others as well as to unset or unclear rules. Types of peer violence are defined as follows:

- physical violence (beating, kicking, pushing off, pulling someone's hair, restriction of someone's mobility);
- verbal violence (being offensive, abusive language with sexual and social connotation, spreading lies);
- psychical violence (social exclusion, isolation, stigmatization);
- blackmailing or economic violence (exaction for money or other material things, exaction for cooperating in cheating)
- sexual violence (touching, sexual harassment)

The prevailing forms of violence in schools are psychical and verbal (The commission for analyzing the problem of violence in the Slovenian schools, 2004).

In 1996 a new supplemented *Statute on the rights and responsibilities of the pupils in the elementary school* was adopted in which issues of children's safety and violence in schools was defined more exactly than in previous one. According to article 26 of the Statute schools are obliged to perform diverse activities and implement diverse measures with the purpose to ensure safety of pupils and to prevent violence. Furthermore, the 28th article states that school must protect pupils from molestation, torture, oppression, discrimination, humiliation and persuading into acts which are not in accordance with the law and cultural norms (Pavlović in Šelih 1996). On the other hand *The Act on Elementary School* (adopted in 1996 too) does not

address the issue of pupils' safety and violence prevention in school environment except in terms of punishment measures for the perpetrators. In the experts' opinion the Act is deficient in this respect and should define the schools' obligations to assure safety of children as well as provide directives for teachers and principals how to act at a suspicion of torture and abuse of children. However, both the *Statute on the rights and responsibilities of the pupils in the elementary school* and the *Act on Elementary School* give the impression that the violation of property is more important than the violation of one's physical and psychic integrity.

2. First and second generation immigrants in Slovenia and peer violence

If peer violence in schools is framed more or less in individual and psychopathological terms then discussion on immigrant peer violence brings in more intersectional and structural perspectives. However, it should be pointed out that even the discourse on immigrant peer violence does not surpass cultural stereotypes and that treatments of immigrant peer violence are marked with one-sidedness.

In 2000 and 2001 a research *Deviation, Violence and Criminality (Odklonskost, Nasilje in Kriminaliteta)* was carried out focusing on problems of young second generation immigrants. Several reasons were incentive for conducting this research. In last decade reporting on violence increased in public discussion. Schools were reporting of problems of pupils of non-Slovene nationalities in meeting educational standards, particularly in language skills, and in behavioral norms. Non-Slovenes were becoming a salient issue also in several policy areas due to diverse problems regarding citizenship status, housing, work and other problems. In 1990s the prevalent public opinion assumed that acts of violence were in increase and that this was essentially linked with non-Slovenes. According to the expert opinion (Dekleva 2002), however, this assumption was not based so much on the fact of empirical growth of violent acts, but mainly on a more rigorous definition of violence, on higher standards of human rights and sensibility for abuse and violation of rights. One of the main aims of research was to find out whether or not a link between nationality and peer violence exists (either on the side on victim or on the side of perpetrator). Theoretical background of the research consisted on Sellin's theory of cultural conflicts, theory of deprivation, Merton's theory on tensions between recourses and objectives, and to a much lesser extent on theory of social

discrimination. The outcome of the research, however, showed that nationality of youth and their parents did not occur as an important indicator of vulnerability for peer violence (neither on the side of victim neither on the side of perpetrator). Instead, most important indicators of peer violence proved to be attitudes toward masculinity and gender relations, attitudes toward violence and (non)skills of non-violent conflict resolution.

Immigration to Slovenia started at the end of 1950, but particularly after 1974 when labour markets in Western European countries were closed. In 1991, when Slovenia seceded from former Yugoslavia, approx. 227.000 citizens of other former Yugoslav republics became inhabitants of Slovenia. They were mainly economic immigrants. The end of the century was marked by a period of war in former Yugoslavia and by increasing number of new sort of immigrants - war refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia seeking for shelter in Slovenia. Most of them were living with their Slovenian relatives and friends, outside refugees' shelters. Many had experienced extreme war violence. At the same time Slovenia has been opening towards EU, which indicated additional possibilities for increasing migration streams.

It has to be noted that second generation immigrants in Slovenia differ from "classical" immigrants, as for instance Turks in Germany or Slovenes in USA. The difference lies in the fact that their situation changed dramatically in a very short period - without moving to another country their status transformed from being an equal citizen of Yugoslavia to being an immigrant in Slovenia, due to a pure act of secession of Slovenia from former Yugoslavia. Many among them found themselves split among their working and personal existence which was bounded to Slovenia and, on the other hand, between their family, culture and other symbolical attachments, which remained outside Slovenian state borders. Therefore national identity of Serbs, Bosnians, Croats and others got stronger; at the same time due to secession nationalistic feelings of Slovenians got empowered also.

Socio-economic inequality, split cultural identity, higher aspirations (linked to economic standard and consumerism) and not-readiness to adjust to the norms of a host country were depicted as key determinants of the second generation immigrants in Slovenia. Authors of the research (in Razpotnik 2002) noted that these frustrations may have led to occurrence of a need for alternative values and norms. Hence violence of the second generation immigrant

peer groups was conditioned by both, cultural and social class factors, and was perceived as the outcome of social disintegration and marginalization of immigrant youth.

In 1997 a pilot research *Who is a "chefur"?* (*Kdo je "čefur"?*, Lesar 1998) dealt with a phenomenon of second generation immigrants' gangs organized on the principles of nationality and locality. Gangs appeared in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, where they exercised intimidation and physical attacks on inhabitants. The research represents a sole example of discussion of peer-violence outside schools to be found. The findings showed that members of these gangs were 15 to 19 year old boys nourishing a hierarchical men culture in urban neighborhoods. Some of the gangs were linked with criminal underground, drug dealing and pilferage. Gangs formed a subculture which can be discerned by specific outfit, loud music listening and violence performed on the streets, in clubs and in public transport. Gangs supposedly sought for a model in mafia. The expert explanation of peer violence based on ethnicity noted a growing socio-economic division in society and growing nationalism of mainstream politics which represented both, a threat and a frustration for immigrant youth (Čelik in Sarkič 1996). A very low socio-economic status of gang members was compensated by belonging to a good gang, explains Kožuh (in Sarkič 1996). In that period Kožuh introduced "street pedagogy" in Slovenia and encouraged formation of youth clubs as a preventive alternative to street gangs. For many years sport and music have been perceived as the strongest prevention for all sorts of youth delinquency in Slovenia. Beside "chefurs" gangs formed on the basis of nationality, skin-head groups and football fan clubs have been treated as forms of peer violence outside the school also. However, skin heads and football fans did not necessarily consist solely of youngsters, and except gender (masculinity), their social characteristics have not been surveyed (Bučar-Ručman, 2004).

In general, peer violence performed by immigrant youngsters is depicted as a deviant and criminal behavior of marginal social groups. It appears as a sole manifestation of peer violence outside the school environment. School experts (teachers, social workers, social pedagogues, headmasters) share the opinion that problems of the first and the second generation immigrants are social, not national. Although one can come across a principled recognition, existing mainly in academic sphere, that reasons for first and second generation immigrants' peer violence are imbedded in their experiences of discrimination, socio-

¹ The word »chefur« is used to refer to some of the immigrants from ex-Yugoslavia. It brings offensive connotations.

economic deprivation and other kinds of systemic and structural violence performed by mainstream institutions, this recognition does not affect neither practice nor policies. In Slovenia preventive or curative programmes or projects taking into consideration structural violence and its consequences within or outside schools were not to be found. Surveys on immigrants' violence did not document and reflect upon the other side of the story – violence of natives and structural violence of the system – and were in that sense socially and culturally biased, unjust and stigmatized (Dekleva, Razpotnik 2002). Most of the violence preventive projects are focused on school environment, but do not touch upon gender or ethnic dimensions of peer violence. For instance, research show that in schools achievement of second generation immigrants is lower in comparison with their native school mates (Trnovšek in Dekleva, Razpotnik 2002). However, existing preventive programs carried out in schools do not address structural violence (induced by school environment and teachers) going hand in hand with peer violence on ethnic ground (induced by native school-mates) as problem. Research has also established (Dekleva, Razpotnik 2002) that attitudes on gender (cultural preconceptions on masculinity and femininity) and gender relations affected vulnerability for violence to a very high extent on both, victim's and perpetrator's side. However, hardly any violence prevention project in Slovenia is focused on gender issues. Nationality and gender appear to be invisible, unpleasant topics, and are as a rule not perceived as "official" topics. School experts admit (Dekleva, Razpotnik 2002) that on these extremely disputable ideological issues consensus is difficult to be reached, therefore it is easier to treat them "salient", with "flexibility" and "individual approach".

3. Overview of projects in the field of peer violence

A review of activities and projects in the field of peer violence showed that most of them are based on violence prevention programme in schools. A common and 'popular' approach used in projects related to peer violence is integrative approach or systematic approach. The integrative approach is based on zero tolerance and on the idea that each school employee (management, teachers, experts and other staff) is involved in developing a safe school environment as well as in violence prevention. The idea is also to include everyone involved in the development of educational process: teachers, management of the school, pupils and parents; some projects include also members of a wider community.

- The project **Prevention programmes for diminishing violence in elementary school** (conducted by National Agency for Schooling) is based on the integrative approach. Program is flexible in terms of its content and forms of implementation and adaptable to the needs of particular school. Prevention programme follows the ideas of gaining zero tolerance of peer violence, inclusion of information, knowledge about violence prevention in school activities (lessons, projects, school camps, school's parliament, etc.), and involvement of different groups in any way related to the school (pupils, parents, teachers, school staff, management and local community). Main aims of developing an integrative approach of preventive programme in a school are to recognize and to be aware of the problem of peer violence, and to determine the state of the affairs. Accordingly the school prepares a plan and a time frame of its implementation. For the realisation of these aims following steps have to made:
 - to determine the extent of violence,
 - to identify the approaches school is already using,
 - to analyse the atmosphere in the school, in the class, whether and how pupils are involved in school activities,
 - to identify the problem,
 - to recognize pupils' opinion and,
 - to define the aims and steps of the implementation of measures.

This is a two year programme. Evaluation of the programme follows after the first year of implementation. Activities are evaluated in order to determine if the aims were achieved and what could be improved. Within the two years management, teachers and experts of the school gain knowledge about violence prevention, and than in the third year school staff carry on with the implementation of activities. Topics included in the programme are emotions (expressing the emotions, feeling, how to control emotions, etc.), interpersonal relations (communication, respect, tolerance, and conflict resolution), self-image (how I am, what do I want, what are my goals, etc.) and sensibilisation for the problem of violence (what is violence, who is violent and who is victim, hat can I do, etc.), values, rules and class atmosphere (Pušnik, <http://www.zrss.si/>)

- **Be brave and speak up! (Zberi pogum in povej!)** is a project conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Police. Project is targeted at pupils of elementary schools. Main aim of the project is raising awareness about peer violence, recognition of different types of peer violence and change of attitude towards peer violence among pupils and school employees. Main project activities are projection of a film about violence followed by a discussion with policemen and policewomen giving basic information on where to get help in case of violence. This violence prevention programme informs about the work of the police in the field of peer violence. Its innovative moment is in an active role of the police in the project by explaining and discussing the issues of violence with pupils. In such manner the police does not act only as persecutor of perpetrators, but also as a source of information and help (Lešnik Mugnaioni, 2007).
- **Amnesty International Slovenia** organizes workshops on peer violence and conflict resolution, which are based on violence prevention activities. Workshops are targeted at pupils of elementary and secondary schools. Main aims are to raise awareness about peer violence and to teach skills of conflict resolution. Annually approximately 100 workshops in 30 schools are conducted. An innovative project of Amnesty International is **Love is love (Ljubezen je ljubezen)**, which focuses on raising awareness about homophobic violence and about rights of homosexuals, and encourages schools to open up for the topic of gender and sexual orientation. Main target groups are pupils of the last three years of elementary schools and pupils of secondary schools. This project also presents violence prevention programme with the aim of raising awareness and changing the attitude toward homosexuals (Lešnik Mugnaioni, 2007).
- In violence prevention project **Safe point (Varna točka)** targeting from 6 to 18 years old children and youth the local community is directly involved. Public places, such as local stores, pharmacies, institutes, organizations, companies, etc. can become 'safe points' to which children with a problem (if they got lost, were intimidated by their peers, cannot go home or get in touch with their parents, witness a criminal act, etc.) can turn to and get information and help. At easily accessible 'Safe points' an adult persons is present to help children with advice, information or to make them feel comfortable and secure (basically, to assure them a safe place). The advantage of 'safe points' is that the places are not directly related to the problem of violence (such as

police station, social work centers, family, etc.), which makes it easier for children and youth to come to and speak up. Responsible adults of 'safe points' participate in educational trainings in order to gain knowledge on how to help children in need. 'Safe points' were established in five cities and towns in Slovenia. (Lešnik Mugnaioni, 2007; meeting with Alja Otavnik, representative of Unicef Slovenia, September 2007)

- Another project is **Skala (The Rock)** (conducted by a catholic NGO, Zavod Janeza Smrekarja, www.skala.salve.si), which is also focused on the prevention work with young people of 13 to 25 years of age. The main idea is to offer a safe place for youth to spend their leisure time in joining their activities, and a counseling service. The project covers three cities in Slovenia. Its specific element is education work in the streets. The 'street educators' are experts and volunteers, who basically go to the streets and talks with youth, organize social and entertainment activities. They also offer counseling and accompany young people to particular institutions (education, employment, etc.). Beside the street work, project Skala organizes also a Bus of Joy – mobile youth center (Avtobus veselja – mobilni mladinski center), which offers a place for young people to meet, to write homework, conducts workshops and performs counseling. They operate three times a week in certain parts of Ljubljana only. Another activity is Youth center 12 (Mladinski center 12-ka), which is open daily (except on Sunday) and offers a safe place for youth of 7 to 13 years of age. In Youth center 12 young people can get help with studying and homework, they can play and participate in workshops. Beside that Youth center 12 also organizes sport activities, trips and other free time activities (cinema, gallery, museum, etc.) (Možina, Pinosa, 2004, 257-266).
- **Association against violent communication (Društvo za nenasilno komunikacijo, <http://www.drustvo-dnk.si/>)** is an NGO that started their activities in 1996. Among their activities (counseling, mediation, etc.) they organize also preventive workshops for pupils of elementary and secondary schools, and offer lectures for teachers and parents. They cover the whole country (they have two offices, in Ljubljana and in Maribor) and they organize between 250 and 300 workshops per year. In school year 2007/08 they started with counseling for boys of 14 to 18 years of age with a police record.

Workshops are based primarily on prevention programmes with the emphasis on raising awareness, critical thinking, reflection of values and standpoint concerning violence, learning alternative practice of dealing with violence and give the opportunity to pupils to speak up about their own problems. Their standpoint is that violence is something that we learn in society; therefore the main aim of workshops is conflict resolution and non-violent communication. The aim of the workshops is also to offer an opportunity for pupils to express their thoughts, understanding and opinion on selected topics focusing on non-violent communication. The main purpose of workshops is to present different types of violence and definition of mental, sexual, psychical, physical violence, and to seek for non-violent alternative conflict resolution. Another aim of the workshops is also to transfer knowledge on differentiation between constructive criticism and an assault, differentiation between a joke and violence, to teach about how to help in instance of peer violence, mental, sexual, psychical, physical violence. Workshops cover following topics: violence, non-violent communication, self-image, conflict resolution, discrimination and gender identity.

Workshops represent an alternative way of dealing with violence by opening up a space for topics, such as discrimination, violence and non-violent communication. The above mentioned topics are usually not covered by other violence prevention programmes. Besides, the work of the Association involves segments of intersectional approach by understanding that power relations originate in social factors, such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc.

- **The National School for Leadership in Education – NSLE (Šola za ravnatelje)** (<http://www.solazaravnatelj.si/>) was established in 1995 by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia with the purpose of training and professional development of head teachers and candidates for head teachers. Among various activities of the NSLE, from the peer violence perspective, the most important programme is Networks of Learning Schools. The programme is based on the concept of effectiveness in schools and kindergartens and is implemented in form of networks.

The Networks of learning schools II is focused on problem solving, where a topics, such as learning and teaching, strategies for preventing violence, developing climate for an effective school and citizenship education, are defined in advance.

Strategies for Preventing Violence is an ongoing project, which started in school year 2002/2003. The main aim of this Network is to enable a more effective confrontation with violence and sensibilisation of violence in kindergartens, elementary and high schools. In kindergartens and schools involved in project development teams are formed (consisting of teachers, management and other school staff, such as cleaners and housekeepers). Teams take an active role in the project activities, such as seminars, etc. According to methodology of the NSLE the *Strategies for preventing violence* first steps are presentation of the situation at kindergarten or school (focusing on types and forms of violence that were observed, what activities of prevention were used, what were the values and principles toward the violence, what were the rules and usual practice of proceeding towards violence) and development of action plans/strategies for improvements in the field of violence prevention. First steps are followed by implementation of activities planned in the action plans and evaluation (for example, to include activities in subjects, such as civic education).

- **UNICEF**

Project *Speak up! Let's break the silence about violence against children – For the safe school (POVEJ! Spregovorimo o nasilju nad otroki – Za varno šolo)*, Unicef and NGO, Društvo Zaletalnica.

This violence prevention project, which is based on the integrative approach, started in school year 2006/2007 with the pilot programme *Za varno šolo (For the safe school)* in three elementary schools (two in Ljubljana and one in Maribor). Due to schools' interests the project will continue in the school year 2007/08, when additional four elementary schools will join the project. The idea of the project is that violence is not recognized as a problem and when it is, school employees in do not have the knowledge about how to react and what to do in case of peer violence. The aim of the pilot programme is to assure a safe and encouraging environment for children along with raising awareness among pupils, parents and school employees about peer

violence, and sensibilisation of different types of violence, that are based on social status, gender and racial stereotypes. Peer violence is depicted in a situation when a child or young person is a victim of violent behavior of a peer group.

The pilot programme starts with the formation of a coordinating team (school employees), which is responsible for all programme activities at school. Pupils and employees fill in a questionnaire on understanding and perception of violence at school. Participants of the programme (pupils, employees, parents) receive educational materials (handbooks, manuals) for implemented activities, such as workshops, round tables, talk shows, etc. At the beginning of programme the responsibilities and obligations concerning active roles of all employees in the programme activities (such as, school help-line for victims of violence and school letter box (for questions, notices, etc.)) are defined. Programme workshops for employees, children and parents are lead by an expert. Workshops for employees aim to educate how to intervene in case of violent act and violent behavior of peers. Workshops for children aim to encourage peers to speak up about the violence at school (as victims or as observers of peer violence) and consequently to reach a decrease of peer violence. Local community, such as social work centers, health centers and police are also involved in the project activities. Beside workshops and talk shows there are also other activities, such as school letter box and mentorship (an older pupil mentors a younger pupil). All activities are evaluated (meeting with Alja Otavnik, representative of Unicef Slovenia, http://www.unicef.si/main/unicef_v_sloveniji.wlgt).

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