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GUIDELINES FOR ANALYSING, PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH VIOLENCE IN A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT – THE SLOVENIAN APPROACH

ABSTRACT

In 2003 Minister of Education, Science and Sport named the working group to prepare the guidelines on preventing violence in schools. In May 2004 the document was finished. The document contents five parts: Introduction – about bullying and results of Slovenian studies; International findings – different projects and studies in some other countries; Models of good practice in Slovenia; Principles of coping with violence in schools; Measures and strategy.

One of the models of good practice is the project National Educational Institute carried out with schools. It is the whole school approach in making antibullying school policy.

We started off with a three-day course and continued by determining the current state of affairs. After collecting the information and determining the school's strengths and weaknesses, the school set its goals – what it wanted to improve, in what way and who would be responsible for particular measures. Then we drew up a plan of action. In the second part of the project, the action plan was implemented, the work being done was monitored, more training took place and, finally, there followed an evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2003 the Minister of Education, Science and Sport appointed the *Commission for Analysing the Problem of Violence in Slovenian Schools*. Its tasks include:

- laying the professional groundwork for dealing with violence in schools;
- formulating professional premises for incorporating issues related to violence prevention into curricula;
- preparing proposals for research and scientific work dealing with violence; and
- drawing up proposals for the continuous professional training of teachers and preparing technical materials

The Commission worked intensively for a year, examining the literature, searching for and collecting examples of good practices abroad and in Slovenia, establishing the principles of combating violence in schools and adopting an action strategy. Consequently, a document titled *Guidelines for Analysing, Preventing and Dealing with/Controlling Violence in a School Environment* came into existence in May 2004.

The document has five chapters: *Introduction, International Comparisons, Examples of Good Practice, Principles of Combating Violence in a School Environment* and *Proposed Measures – a Development Strategy*.

The Commission's position is that this work – in terms of both enhancing the guidelines and seeking specific solutions – really has to be developed further: new information and the results and evaluations of projects and studies would certainly call for more thinking about the proposed measures.

Namely, the proposed measures are intended as relatively general guiding principles or possible solutions, which – should the Minister and the Ministry decide on carrying out individual tasks – would have to be elaborated at greater length, while working out operative steps, which should – some sooner, some later – produce results or possible solutions.

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL CHAPTERS

The *Introduction* to the document presents very briefly:

- the definitions of violence in general,
- the definitions of bullying,
- the forms of bullying, and
- information about the extent of bullying from Slovenian and foreign studies.

The chapter *International Comparisons* sums up the findings of various studies and projects conducted abroad. Through these findings we wanted to show how problems related to bullying are being tackled elsewhere, what difficulties are being encountered and what results are being arrived at. Reference is made to the following:

- *the key findings of the six projects from the European Union's Fifth Framework programme from 1998 until 2002, published in Peter Smith's book, Violence in Schools (2003);*
- *the policies of the former French Minister of Youth, Education and Science, Luc Ferry;*
- and
- *an international study: Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children – HBSC.*

If we examine these studies, we can see that they employ different definitions of bullying as well as different frequency criteria, which is bound to result in varying data on the extent of this phenomenon. Approaches also differ in the use of instruments and sources of data. Nearly all of the approaches are saddled with a lack of structure in monitoring events and evaluating measures. Most of them place emphasis on the importance of prevention and improving school climate.

These findings have helped us compare the activities we are carrying out in Slovenia to activities in other countries. In this way we can compare our starting points, difficulties and measures and receive suggestions for our further work.

The chapter *Examples of Good Practices* presents projects and activities which have become established and which have been going on for a number of years, involving a large number of schools.

- the Prevention Programme for Reducing Violence in Primary Schools – run and coordinated by the National Education Institute of the RS (it will be described in greater detail at the end of this paper)
Project objectives: (targeting pupils, parents and teachers)
 - raising the awareness of the phenomenon of violence;
 - recognising different forms;
 - learning to respond;
 - improving interpersonal relations;
 - encouraging participation;
 - introducing/expanding active approaches.

- Healthy Schools – a project run and coordinated by the Institute of Public Health
The project places significant emphasis on training teachers in promoting the mental health of children and adolescents, particularly through elements such as boosting self-esteem, taking the needs and opinions of young people into consideration, effective listening and responding, successful communication and assertiveness, getting to know each other, coping with change at school, coping with stress at school, participatory approaches, conflict resolution and the prevention of bullying.

- "Hooray, It's Free Time" – a project run and coordinated by the Sports Institute
Programme objectives:
 - increasing the number of active participants in special interest sports programmes for children and youth in their free time (especially during weekends and holidays);
 - increasing the number of open public sports areas when pupils are not in class;
 - increasing the participation of institutions active in the programmes for children and youth (schools, societies, associations, various local groups) and providing adequate funding;
 - upgrading outdoor and indoor sports facilities and areas.

- The Telephone for Children and Adolescents (TCA) – a project run and coordinated by the Association of Friends of Youth of Slovenia
Main programme objective: offering information, encouragement, counselling and assistance to children and adolescents in distress in the form of a telephone crisis line.

- Children's Parliament – at school level, the project is being carried out by elementary schools, and from the municipal to the national levels it is being run and coordinated by the Association of Friends of Youth of Slovenia
Children's Parliament is an example of good practice, with the Government and an NGO working together to promote and ensure conditions for the participation of boys and girls in making decisions on matters relevant to their school, the local community and society at large.
- The "Man Project" society
This is an independent prevention programme aimed at stopping and reducing drug abuse and drug-related violence in Slovenian schools
- The Society for Non-violent Communication – in cooperation with the Office for Youth of the Republic of Slovenia
Goals pledged: training and sensitizing female and male volunteers for work involving violence-related issues, training school staff, and educating children's parents.

The most important parts of the document are Chapters 4 and 5 – *Principles of Combating Violence in a School Environment* and *Proposed Measures as a Development Strategy*. The latter classifies in greater detail the approaches to and methods for putting the principles into practice.

The starting point in formulating the principles was that the existence of violence should be taken seriously and addressed in a planned and professional manner, regardless of differences as to how much violence there is in schools (while taking into consideration the different methods for establishing this), whether there is more violence, less violence or as much violence today as ten or more years ago.

All the principles can be briefly summed up as follows: be active (as a pupil, teacher, head teacher or parent) in shaping positive interpersonal relations in the community or in school. In this way you will help to make everyone feel better, to reduce violence and to make your school safer. Let us examine each principle separately and explain it by way of proposals for its implementation.

- **Supplementing curricular documents with content and competences important for life in the community and care for their implementation.**

In syllabi, in the concepts of class sections and in the concepts of school counselling services ... must be commensurate with the goals and activities with cognitive content such as self-understanding, understanding others, respecting and understanding differences, knowledge and social competences (e.g. expressing one's feelings, recognising and understanding differences, negotiating and decision-making skills). Different forms and methods of instruction have to be developed, offering pupils/students more options for taking part in their school's activities.

Ways should be sought to provide different forms of individual and/or group assistance to pupils/students whose behaviour frequently disrupts class.

The implementation of curricular documents (syllabi and other documents) from the perspective of achieving goals and carrying out activities should be monitored regularly.

- **Creating and preserving a positive school climate facilitating open and high-quality communication**

This has to do with creating an atmosphere conducive to non-violent conflict resolution, an environment dominated by respect for and the acceptance of differences, a positive attitude towards teachers and pupils or students, the feeling of belonging to the school and a strengthening of interpersonal relations.

Teachers' counselling role should be made stronger (and teachers trained for this role), as this facilitates more frequent communication with pupils.

Peer help at school should be bolstered, and pupils/students given a chance to recognise their strong points and possibilities of cooperating with each other. In particular, efforts should be made to develop solidarity, as when, for instance, the school, as part of its voluntary activities, encourages and aids the provision of assistance to fellow pupils, senior citizens and other people in distress (e.g. refugees and foreigners).

- **Establishing and ensuring the high quality of instruction and other activities carried out by schools**

Schools continuously monitor the quality of their work in a process of self-evaluation. In establishing and ensuring high quality the emphasis should be on atmosphere, interpersonal relations and possible violence as perceived by pupils/students, teachers and parents, but also on links with other areas of self-evaluation, such as the planning and implementation of instruction, learning achievements and conditions in schools, including school safety.

- **Schools' consistent responding and proactive functioning at all levels**

Schools must have prevention programmes as well as measures for dealing with violence when it occurs. School administrators and teachers must assume responsibility and care for the safety of school space even at times when there is no instruction (e.g. through the presence of teachers in the hallways and other areas outside of the classrooms, through supervision and by responding to violence).

- **The active role of pupils/students in formulating various school documents, particularly the school rules**

This concerns the active participation of pupils, teachers and other school staff. Living in a community always requires clarity, transparency and rules; hence the importance of familiarity with legal documents which take into account the dimension of rights and duties in connection with educational and disciplinary measures, the dimension of pupils' safety, the provision of adequate work conditions in schools and participation in the creation of laws and by-laws.

It is imperative to get pupils involved in school bodies and children's parliament and for pupils or students to participate in shaping the life of their school. The possibility of designating a pupils' representative to the school should also be considered.

- **The care and responsibility of school headmasters for ensuring the safety of school space and responding to acts of violence**

Professional staff members, particularly school administrators, are responsible for laying down clear-cut rules pertaining to school space, ensuring a safe school environment and responding to acts of violence as well as for their own professional training with respect to violence, school atmosphere and interpersonal relations.

- **Increasing the impact of parents on shaping school life and work**

Getting parents involved is important for three different reasons: information exchange, supplementary training and learning about their perceptions of problems and proposals for solutions.

Cooperation with parents must be based on a partnership relationship.

Parents should be furnished with as many informational materials as possible, regularly updated on school situation evaluations and offered the possibility of using a Web page to convey their positions on events observed and solutions proposed.

Schools may get parents involved in formulating and carrying out prevention programmes and developing pupils' or students' social competences, especially in extracurricular activities.

- **Regular professional training of school staff/care for professional development**

As part of continuous professional training, a high quality of training programmes offered to teachers and other professionals in schools ought to be ensured (this refers to their training in handling cases of violence and doing preventive work); different prevention programmes should be developed in specific schools (by schools themselves or with help from outside experts) for the purpose of boosting assertiveness and communication, facilitating mediation and raising the awareness among teachers in general of the importance of their own professional development.

- **Cooperating with local bodies (e.g. social work centres, the police, judicial bodies) and NGOs**

Cooperation between institutions and non-governmental organisations (e.g. the local commune, counselling and health care institutions, the police and other ministries, especially the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Interior) should be developed in the future as an operative principle.

- **Cooperating with the media and preparing diverse materials for teachers, pupils/students and parents**

Care should be taken to ensure the regular production of informational and professional documentation such as manuals, computer materials and video materials for handling violence for different target groups such as pupils/students, teachers and parents. The Ministry could, together with the media (television would be the most

effective medium), conduct an information campaign in which public figures such as athletes, artists, writers and scientists would promote tolerance.

- **Adequate planning of school buildings, equipment and school indoor and outdoor space**

Space size (too many individuals in too small a space is a factor conducive to conflict) is as important as space quality or structure.

Ways should be found to use school space, e.g. libraries, gyms, school playgrounds and computer classrooms more flexibly both when pupils are in class and when they have no instruction.

The Commission has added three quite important proposals to its existing development strategy proposals:

1. Establishing a special national-level council, which would include experts, teachers, head teachers, parents and pupils/students and the main purpose of which would be to implement and maintain, through local councils (with the same make-up) concepts and models of violence prevention and management tailored to concrete environments (schools). We would have to expand work at the level of local councils gradually. For a start, we suggest that local councils be established and begin their work in several municipalities.
2. As part of development activities, procedures should be elaborated for evaluating development and research projects and training programmes dealing with violence in schools.
3. In the coming years, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport would have to commission and financially support research and development activities in the area of violence in the broadest sense of the word: formulating methodology for the systematic monitoring of violence in Slovenian schools; analysing violence, developing and evaluating measures for combating violence in schools, and developing prevention programmes and introducing them into schools.

AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE – A PREVENTION PROGRAMME FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, a project conducted by the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia

The main principle of a *whole school approach* was observed in formulating the strategy. The model which favours a systematic approach requires that every single school staff member – from school administrators to teachers to school counsellors to other employees – take part in creating a comfortable working and learning environment and in preventing disagreeable events or disturbances. If schools bear this in mind and act towards this goals, they stand to experience positive change and better results. In other words, *all participants* in the education process – pupils,

teachers, school administrators and parents – are *involved* in formulating and implementing the programme.

The programme specifies activities for each group – different in both content and form.

The prevention programme has been formulated and implemented according to the *following principles*:

- a) The first operative principle is that content- and form-related work should be incorporated into schools' regular activity (instruction, homeroom classes, field trips, camps, project days, school parliaments) and thus become its integral part rather than something with an extraneous existence. Activities are planned at the level of a class section, class, school section or an entire school.
- b) The second operative principle is linking the activities for pupils to those for their parents. For instance, a poll conducted among the pupils helps to determine the extent and type of violence, while the parents are asked about their views either by means of a questionnaire or at a parent-teacher meeting, on which occasion all the results are presented. The findings are supplemented by teachers' observations, and solutions are then sought together.
- c) The third principle is that the programme – both its content and the forms of its implementation – is adjusted to the needs of particular schools and their specific problems detected among the pupils, parents or in the collective itself.

The *steps* within the whole school approach to formulating a school's prevention programme are as follows:

1. becoming aware of the problem: in this phase the school detects and recognises the phenomenon of violence and decides to act.
2. assessing the situation: in this phase the school draws up a plan of areas and levels at which it will assess the situation. To that end, it must establish a time frame and a schedule as it is not possible to cover everything at once. As for the objective – formulating a prevention programme – it is reasonable to analyse the situation in the following areas:
 - ❖ the extent of violence
 - ❖ the approaches already employed by the school (e.g. ways of dealing with issues, measures, rules, homeroom class discussion topics, using different methods and techniques, cooperating with external institutions)
 - ❖ school culture and atmosphere
 - ❖ class atmosphere
 - ❖ pupils' participation in their school's life and work (activities, becoming aware of problems, taking their views and proposals into consideration)
 - ❖ cooperation with parents (methods, frequency, issues).

3. clearly defining the problem, goals and ways of proceeding: based on the analysis of the situation, the school sets priorities and decides which problems to work on in the short term, which in the long term, which problems to deal with immediately and which may be tackled next year. This is followed by the selection of the goal: what they want to improve and achieve with regard to the problem selected and how to go about it.
4. formulating the programme in cooperation with pupils and parents. The preparation of the programme is started by a selected group of teachers, headmaster and school counsellor. It is necessary to plan activities for the staff, pupils and parents. The proposal is then presented to other teachers, pupils and parents. They, in turn, complement and modify the programme with their own ideas... The programme then assumes its definite form.
5. presenting the programme to the public (the parents' council, the school council, development and annual work plans, posters, the school newspaper) – this is important for the school as it sends a clear message to everyone about the school's violence reduction policy.
6. implementing the programme in the selected areas and at the selected levels, with the selected content and objectives, throughout the school year. At their regular meetings, members of the group monitor/discussion the implementation, exchange experiences, resolve possible difficulties and assess the implementation and deadline compliance.
7. evaluating the programme and, possibly, making adjustments and updates; after one year, the work completed should be evaluated in all areas and at all levels. The results should be checked against the objectives in order to establish what was done well, what should be improved, with what they are quite pleased, what new things they have learned, and what elements will be carried on into the future. This is how a new plan comes into existence.

The course of action:

In each school, the project lasts two years. Work begins with instruction relating to school culture and climate, school stress factors, violence and bullying, communication, working with the group and presentations of the experiences of individual schools which have tackled the problem of violence on their own or as part of our project. These are the themes on which further activities (situation assessment) are based, and we develop them in the course of two years' work with respect to the problems and needs of the group or collective.

After the seminar, a decision on project work, i.e. the formulation of the prevention programme, is adopted by the group which must include: the headmaster, the counselling service and most of the teachers. The implementation of all the steps within the whole school approach with this group lasts two years. In the third year, the headmaster and the leader of this group must see to it that all professional staff members and other employees get involved in the enlargement and implementation of the programme.

The group's members must meet regularly. The purpose of these meetings is to evaluate performance, plan activities until the next meeting and provide brief forms of training such as workshops on themes selected by the group. These meetings should be planned, as should the training and the group's other activities. A work plan is drawn up with the group – the objectives, content, people in charge of implementation, implementation deadlines. Of course, informal meetings of teachers who perceive problems are welcome. At both planned and informal meetings experiences are exchanged, support provided and views clarified, while co-workers get to know each other better... and all this gradually leads to an improvement in school atmosphere.

This work should be evaluated at the end of the school year. The evaluation is conducted primarily at a level of personal experience with regard to the work done and objectives achieved. At group level, the members ask themselves the following questions:

- ❖ What new things have we learned by drawing up and implementing the prevention programme?
- ❖ What new things have the pupils learned?
- ❖ How did cooperation with the members of the group go?
- ❖ What difficulties did we encounter in implementing the programme and how did we resolve them?
- ❖ Which dilemmas have remained unresolved?
- ❖ What support and assistance will we need in the future?
- ❖ What elements are we going to carry on into the future (content, methods) in our work with pupils, parents and collaborators?

At school level, the following questions need to be asked:

- ❖ What objectives for last year were achieved? Which were not and why not?
- ❖ How did we inform teachers who had not been involved in the first phase about programme implementation?
- ❖ What (if any) bearing did project activities have on changing school atmosphere?
- ❖ What are the concrete results of our work?
- ❖ What elements are we going to carry on into the future (content, methods) in our work with pupils, parents and collaborators?