

GLOBALISATION OF AGGRESSION AT SCHOOLS: ETHICAL AND MORAL ISSUES¹

MARTA GLUCHMANOVÁ

Abstract: Socio-cultural changes (in families, society and culture) are frequently negatively reflected in the minds and actions of young people influenced by the media as part of the globalization of society. We often remark upon the growth in aggressiveness, violence and intolerance among young people both in school and outside school. We often consider these to be the symptoms of the moral crisis in our society.

Key words: globalization; school; students; aggressiveness; violence; media.

Introduction

Globalization is having a growing impact on all spheres of human life, including education. It is clear to all (from September/October 2006 on there was a series of school massacres in the USA and Canada) that aggression and violence is on the increase in educational institutions. The tragedies in the schools concerned sparked much discussion on aggression, violence and security in schools. The electronic media and daily press report similar incidents and problems in various other Western countries, namely the UK, Germany, Norway, France, etc. These issues are also starting to affect Slovakia, although perhaps not to such an extent as in other countries. Recently, there has been much talk of a crisis of morality, intolerance, growing aggression and violence, vandalism, etc., affecting Slovak education.

Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Slovakia has undergone major change in many spheres of life, including education. This has tended to be accompanied by repeated violation of laws, discipline, and school regulations. Was this the price of democracy and freedom? We often witness situations in which the granting of freedom or money makes little sense in terms of the identity of individuals. It may seem at first sight that violent and aggressive tendencies affect only children and young people from deprived emotional and financially impoverished backgrounds. But how are we to understand similar cases that occur among adolescents and young students and people who live in prosperity, wealth, freedom,

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and essentially lack for nothing as far as material security is concerned? Many generations have deemed that it is only by achieving material security that satisfaction and happiness are possible. It can be seen, on the contrary, that aggression and violence seem to be on the increase rather than falling. Having said that, is it possible to talk of a moral, ethical or spiritual crisis of our society or mankind? Who is responsible for this state of affairs and situation in schools? Is it the family, the teachers, society at large or state institutions? I think that there is no control or effective legislation capable of reducing aggression in action and social behavior. The ever-increasing aggression is also reflected in the growing number of negative phenomena in educational institutions, from primary schools to universities.

Teachers and aggression at schools

I will attempt to address the issue of aggression and violence in children and young people in schools from the viewpoint of the teacher or rather from the perspective of pedagogical ethics (ethics of teaching). In this connexion, it is desirable to ask whether aggression in children or young people actually occurred in the past. It did indeed, although perhaps in a different form because times change and so do manifestations of aggression or violence. World literature also contains numerous descriptions of violence, brutality and tyranny in schools. In his novels *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, for example, Charles Dickens painted a vivid picture of conditions in 19th-century English schools, marked by the brutality or even sadism carried out in the form of physical punishment by teachers (Dickens, 1993; 2004; Gluchman, 2006, pp. 403-423).

Where exactly does aggression in small children and young people come from? The question of whether or not it is innate to humans is known to cause much difficulty for different professions, such as doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and so forth. At present school curriculums often include courses on ethics and religious education. What I am interested in here, however, is aggression and violence from the viewpoint of the ethics of teaching. 'Ethical education' (often mistakenly referred to as 'Ethics') has been introduced into Slovak schools and generally involves education based on humanistic ideals and associated attempts to prevent aggression and violence. Pupils at primary and secondary schools are taught to be considerate of others, to acknowledge that their own views, opinions and attitudes are highly subjective, to respect the views and ways of life of their classmates and friends, teachers, educational workers and other people, to approach things using constructive criticism, and, perhaps most of all, they should learn to be critical of themselves. The aim of religious education is primarily to raise awareness and develop and live according to the values of Christianity. One can therefore conclude that both subjects have the same goals, i.e. to help eliminate aggression and violence in our behaviors and actions, but these are pursued in different ways depending on the ideological and philosophical assumptions on which they are based. Currently, I conclude that children and young people especially lack a sense of responsibility for the moral state of society. Many believed that the introduction of ethical and religious education in primary and secondary schools would improve the moral awareness of pupils and that this would consequently be reflected in their behavior and actions.

I stress that it is necessary to emphasize respect for other people (a dimension that young people today often seem to lack), self-respect, and individual responsibility for everything

we do. All of these things should be part of ‘ethical education’ in Slovak schools. Let us be honest with ourselves, though: is it enough if children are educated in this way in schools and only during these lessons? No, of course not. It is vital that the seeds of such an upbringing are sown at the earliest age. This responsibility is primarily down to parents because children generally grow up in immediate contact with their parents. Later they come into contact with pre-school pedagogical workers and teaching staff at the compulsory primary and secondary school levels. It should also be borne in mind that, particularly in later life, the society in which an individual lives bears equal responsibility. In most cases, the roots of children’s negative behavior in schools are to be sought within the family. Negative behavior is particularly acute when parents lack the time required to raise their children.

Schools are often reluctant to admit that violence is perpetrated within their grounds. It is morally incumbent upon teachers to tackle these manifestations of violence at the earliest stages possible, because if we overlook them, or underestimate the importance of tackling them, things may get out of hand, and we may be left unable to put a stop to the kind of aggression and violence in question. If the worst comes to the worst, aggression and violence can lead to the kinds of tragedies we have witnessed in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere.

What exactly is the essence of immorality in such manifestations of aggression and violence? Physical violence, for example, involves causing pain and suffering, leaving the victim unhappy and sad. If the aggressor causes mental pain, on the other hand, it usually involves the victim being humiliated in some way and their human dignity being degraded; in addition, the victim’s self-confidence suffers a blow which may lead to further behavioral or speech disorders, stressful situations, etc. According to Kidron & Fleischmann (2006), during adolescence, particularly the earliest stages, teachers have a huge impact on their students’ social and moral development as long as they emphasize pro-social behavior in peers and adults. It is possible to improve the behavior of children and young people by creating opportunities for them to participate in class decision-making, to respect other people’s views, etc. All of these things help to develop their sense of responsibility and motivate them to learn; moreover, they have a positive influence on student ability to acquire new skills and to get better results at school. The teacher’s task is to develop pro-social relationships in schools and get all other pedagogical workers, school management, and parents involved, so as to provide examples of kind, respectful behavior for school-age young people (Kidron & Fleischmann, 2006, p. 91).

In Slovakia, there are no extensive studies on violence and aggression in schools; we still seem to be reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the issue, although there is considerable awareness and discussion among staff. We know that aggression and violence exist in Slovakia, but relatively little time is devoted to solving the problem. Surveys that have been carried out in Western countries—particularly in the USA—show that most violence is perpetrated by older primary school pupils and secondary school pupils; furthermore, boys are generally more likely to become aggressors rather than girls (Speaker-Petersen, 2000, p. 69). These morally negative phenomena should be tackled at the earliest stages possible; if ignored, the behavior and conduct of aggressive and violent individuals may result in far-reaching consequences in later stages of life and adulthood.²

² Similarly, many other authors point out that aggression and violence are considerably widespread in schools in Western Europe and Northern America (Behre, Astor, & Mayer, 2001, pp. 132-153; Flannery,

One of the few existing studies on aggression and violence in Slovak secondary schools has been carried out by Jozef Džuka and Anna Jenčová. The findings were published in the journal *Pedagogické rozhľady* [Pedagogical Views], and the main research question was: Are there any manifestations of violence against teachers by Slovak secondary school pupils? The answer was yes. More precisely, from 5 to 35 per cent of secondary school teachers claimed that in the last 30 days they had experienced at least one of the forms of aggression or violence given in the questionnaire: verbal violence, physical violence, theft or handling others' possessions, forcing others do things against their will, attempting to socially isolate others (Džuka & Jenčová, 2005, p. 19). Research findings in Slovakia and abroad indicate that the growth in aggression and bullying in younger generations is part of the global growth in aggression and violence in the world.

In philosophy and ethics insufficient attention is paid to analyzing aggression and violence in schools (professional teacher ethics is developing rather slowly in Slovakia and other post-communist countries). There are a number of papers within the scholarly literature on the outcomes of sociological, psychological and pedagogical analysis and research on this in Slovakia today (Džuka & Dalbert, 2007; Gajdošová, 1999/2000; Harineková, 1999; 2000; Jusko, 2002; Ondrejkovič, 2000; Poněšický, 2005; Rychnavská, 2003; Schusterová, 2000). Relations between teachers and pupils and students are based on a complex ethical understanding of behavior on both sides (Aurin & Maurer, 1993, p. 293). Bearing in mind the age of pupils and students and their cognitive, intellectual, and moral abilities, teachers should make an effort in teaching to build satisfactory partnerships based on mutual understanding. On the one hand, teachers should attempt to understand the position of pupils and students and their behavior and actions; on the other hand, they should create the right conditions and atmosphere so pupils and students have the opportunity to understand the role and position of teachers within the relationship, including their moral duty and responsibility for the students developing into morally mature individuals.

In addition to teaching as professionals, teachers are also expected to integrate their skills and knowledge and be aware of their moral and pedagogical responsibilities and duties to those in their care i.e. students. Attention should also be paid to developing teachers' ethical and moral competence (Colnerud, 1997, p. 628). Slovak teachers seem to lack sufficient theoretical and practical training to enable them to tackle negative issues such as aggression and violence.

Violence in the media

The media has increasing influence on society and the way it operates these days, particularly the electronic media. It also plays a role in shaping consciousness (including moral consciousness) in children and young people. Violence in the media, be it private or state-owned television, radio, magazines, or newspapers is also reflected by adults, young

Wester, & Singer, 2004, pp. 559-573; Furlong & Morrison, 2000, pp. 71-86; Lawrence & Green, 2005, pp. 587-602; Morrell, 2002, pp. 38-46; Purugganan et al., 2000, pp. 949-952; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005, pp. 101-110; Speaker & Petersen, 2000, pp. 66-73; Unnever, 2005, pp. 153-171; Whitted & Dupper, 2005, pp. 167-175).

people and school children. It is particularly strong in children and young people. The media changes people's values and seem to weaken sensitivity.

The media, mainly television, often report on the younger age of children and young people who perpetrate crimes and display aggression and violence both in and outside school. It has also been observed in Slovakia. In 2005 it led to the Slovak parliament amending the legislation to lower the age limit of criminal responsibility from 15 to 14 years.

Unfortunately, culture, which influences people including the young, is sometimes based on consumerism. The mass media, especially television, seem to have a paradoxical influence on young people today. Unfortunately, aggression and violence, advertisements, and reality shows are frequently shown on television shifting the views of young people in the wrong direction. Television audience surveys suggest that young people are generally more attracted to programs that promote negative ideals rather than positive ones. Surveys in the USA and other Western countries indicate that there is increasing violence on television despite the many regulations and programs designed to limit it. The average American child spends 23-27 hours watching TV in addition to 1-2 films containing violence in a week (Purugganan et al., 2000, p. 949). What is the case in Slovakia? Are Slovak children and adolescents similar?

Teachers' attitudes to different manifestations of aggression

It is not only parents who should be concerned to react spontaneously, actively and purposefully to a child's behavior. Teachers and educators increasingly complain about pupils' aggression in and outside school, often resorting to resigning from their positions. Aggression leads to perpetual stress, often resulting in burn-out syndrome. Teachers therefore have to tackle the issue with great patience and great self-control so as to cope with these kinds of stressful situations.

At the present stage of social development, we are faced with the apparent globalization of violence, which may potentially impact on all spheres of life. Global social issues will not stop at the gates of schools, though. Education, teachers and pupils all reflect the era they belong to. Left to their own devices, teachers are unable to do away with manifestations of violence and aggression merely through their moral, educational, and pedagogical activities.

Today many criticize teachers for not being able to solve the problems their students have that are often brought about by economic and social causes as well as political decisions. Despite the awareness of the serious consequences of these, teachers feel that the public, government and, often, chief governing bodies in education do not care and are indifferent to their problems. A very often school management presume the fulfilment of tasks in the school, merely based on the consciousness and enthusiasm of most teachers (Fitzmaurice, 2010, 46; O' Brien, 2010, 114). I suppose that the issue of education and the tasks associated with it should be better solved by the Ministry of Education and experts who should know the situation in their field very well. But the reality is often different because nearly every election politicians change educational policy and so they change the laws to suit their own political ambitions.

In 2013 I conducted sociological research in Slovak primary and secondary schools funded by the Agency for Research and Development. The findings indicate that the most pressing questions are those that concern the relationship between teachers and pupils. We

were interested, therefore, in whether, for example, most teachers perceived pupils as people worthy of respect and accepted that they have rights and respected the views presented in class if they are in accordance with generally desirable and applicable standards in society. We also investigated whether the teachers are helpful to their students after lessons, how they are willing or unwilling to help them, especially if a student comes to them outside the classroom. Sometimes teachers are reluctant to engage in mutual communication with pupils or even sometimes verbally humiliate them or laugh at them. However, some pupils behave inappropriately towards teachers, insulting or threatening them. These negatives then often lead to physical manifestations of violence, pupil aggression against teachers who have to physically defend themselves. It is expected that teachers should be a role model in behavior and action. Is that so? Do teachers decide the legitimate needs and demands of pupils fairly? Do teachers solve problems in schools with pupils, colleagues and parents according to ethical rules and principles? What is the situation regarding bribery in primary and secondary schools? If respondents answered yes to these questions, what reason has led them to do? Do senior managements deal with such cases? (Gluchmanová, 2013b, pp. 241-253).

Let us look at the findings of sociological research conducted among teachers at primary and secondary schools in connection with perceptions of aggressive behavior. Almost a quarter of respondents (24.2%) expressed that they saw verbal attacks of any parents against a teacher. We assume that if a parent would threaten a teacher, then that parent's child would be more likely to do so. Some children will then behave aggressively and violently against their teachers. I think that common cooperation among teachers and parents could be useful for solutions of ethical and moral problems in schools. But often parents show a lack of interest in their child. This makes the teacher's work more difficult, particularly if they have no support from the parents (Gluchmanová, 2013a, pp. 227-240).

I believe that teacher-parent interaction is important. Parents and other professionals (psychologists, physicians etc) who come into contact as part of their roles in child development should accept the teacher as partner. Not every teacher is aware of how the pupil interacts with their family. As Marta Černotová has noted, teachers often find this out when they are confronted with problem "cases"—poor pupil performance, truancy, substance abuse, grief, theft, teenage pregnancy of student or pupil. Not understanding the complexity of the pupil-family-school relationship until the problem occurs is too late. Nowadays, children often do not appreciate their parents, denying them the right to intervene in "their things". Some children are out of control, sometimes terrorizing the whole family. The question is, in the case of a problem child at school, out of school, whether it is only the family who is providing the child with warmth, confidence and emotional support. If parents are indifferent, they do not give their child enough attention or provide enough control. Children in these families may experience behavioral problems (Černotová, 1994, pp. 227-230).

Moral problems in schools are a reflection of problems in society generally. Teachers are responsible for minimizing negative behavior among pupils, especially those which might be harmful, or, possibly, have a tragic impact on the health and lives of all those who participate in the educational process. At present, an increase has been observed in aggressive behavior and acts among pupils in and outside school in Slovakia and other post-communist countries. (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005, pp.101-110). This is often considered a manifestation of

a moral crisis in the family and society. Socio-cultural changes also bring about negative phenomena affecting children and young people's attitudes and behavior.

Conclusion

When considering the professional ethics of teachers it must be stated that aggression and violence are not only a problem for teachers but also concern parents and all those who participate in the upbringing and education of young people in Slovakia, i.e. Slovak society as a whole. Students are expected to be kind, respectful, tolerant and truthful in relation to one another; however, they are not provided with the best of examples. This is complicated by the social changes Slovak society has undergone in the past 20 years which have often resulted in morally negative phenomena and injustice and this is noticed by young people. This is reflected in discipline. Young impressionable people witness injustice directly or in the media. They witness people committing various fraudulent or criminal acts who then go free, unpunished. They often adopt such behaviors, since many interpret the law in their own way. Some people in charge of justice are also corrupt. Young people today notice all this. How can they, then, be brought up to be honest and just (Bendl, 2005)? If the morality of a society differs from that in schools, it makes it more difficult to bring students up to become moral agents.

I hold the view that the situation in Slovak education is a reflection of conditions in Slovak society. Schools cannot be separated from the society in which they exist, just as the moral climate of a society cannot be overlooked. Issues such as aggression or verbal violence, may be considered in policies shaping the direction of Slovakia and its institutions. The moral problems in society are not left at the school gates; they are part of the daily life of pupils and teachers in Slovakia. Education, including treatment of the issues of aggression and violence are part of the professional ethics of a teacher and fully reflect the era and its socio-cultural changes. Education, together with teachers and their pupils, is not an isolated island where external events do not penetrate. On the contrary, they are an almost identical reflection of all the strengths and weaknesses of the era and society in which teachers and pupils live and act. This also applies to the issues facing the teaching profession in Slovakia at present. The contemporary issues affecting the teaching profession also impact upon the school managing bodies and the media, making them realize that they bear moral responsibility for the future of the country and its citizens too. This is an important task—a moral duty even—for everyone involved in education, regardless of whether they operate at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. Its importance is associated with the new era of the birth of the 21st century and the socio-cultural changes taking place at the moment.

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Department of Humanities,
Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies,
Technical University in Košice,
Bayerova 1,
08001 Prešov,
Slovakia
E-mail: marta.gluchmanova@tuke.sk