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Challenges of Workplace Mobbing Prevention in General Education Schools

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ABSTRACT

Mobbing in general education schools goes beyond the organization, and not only the internal environment of schools but also a wider social context must be evaluated in creating prevention programs. Therefore, this study aims to review and highlight the specific challenges of mobbing prevention in general education institutions. The research was conducted using a semi-systematic review approach. First, a list of relevant terms, which were used to select thematically related articles in scientific databases, was formed. This was followed by reading abstracts and selecting articles for further analysis, which enabled to distinguish relevant categories of prevention challenges. The study has shown that the main challenges arise due to the used management models, inadequate responses of the school administration, the lack of information about mobbing and procedures for solving this problem as well as personal characteristics of the victim and the specific social context. A systematic approach is needed to create prevention programs and conduct research in general education institutions, which would allow not only to evaluate individual and organizational aspects but also to predict the threats arising in the school's social environment and the ways to minimize them.

KEYWORDS: Teacher administration relationship, interpersonal relations, behaviour, violence, schools, management.

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Desafíos de la prevención del acoso laboral en las escuelas de educación general

RESUMEN

El acoso laboral en las escuelas de educación general va más allá de la organización, y al crear programas de prevención se debe evaluar no sólo el entorno interno de las escuelas sino también un contexto social más amplio. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo revisar y resaltar los desafíos específicos de la prevención del mobbing en las instituciones de educación general. La investigación se realizó mediante un enfoque de revisión semisistemática. En primer lugar, se formó una lista de términos relevantes, que se utilizaron para seleccionar artículos temáticamente relacionados en bases de datos científicas. A esto le siguió la lectura de resúmenes y la selección de artículos para un análisis más detallado, lo que permitió distinguir categorías relevantes de desafíos de prevención. El estudio ha demostrado que los principales desafíos surgen debido a los modelos de gestión utilizados, las respuestas inadecuadas de la administración escolar, la falta de información sobre el mobbing y los procedimientos para resolver este problema, así como las características personales de la víctima y el contexto social específico. Se necesita un enfoque sistemático para crear programas de prevención y realizar investigaciones en las instituciones de educación general, lo que permitiría no sólo evaluar los aspectos individuales y organizacionales sino también predecir las amenazas que surgen en el entorno social de la escuela y las formas de minimizarlas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Relación docente administración, relaciones interpersonales, comportamiento, violencia, escuelas, gestión.

Introduction

Treating workplace mobbing as an analogy to a serious and often fatal disease, prevention should become one of the most important concerns of the leader of any organization. This is especially relevant in general education schools, where dynamic and complex social relationships are formed and develop both among teachers themselves and between teachers and representatives of the younger generation, who take over not only knowledge but also ethical standards and models of social relationships. Therefore, in this context, psychological violence manifesting itself in teacher interrelationships has deeper moral consequences for the society, since ethical standards are also taught by a personal

example (Wornham, 2003), while violent behaviour is primarily a “product” of the environment that reinforced maladaptive coping strategies (Howard et al., 2020).

Victims of mobbing in general education institutions are usually attacked in the areas of communication and social relationships (Droppa et al., 2018). As a result, they experience not only negative physical and psychological consequences but also lose motivation and become reluctant to contribute to the organization’s development, their own or their pupils’ academic improvement (Akbasli et al., 2020; İnandi & Büyüközkan, 2022). Although toxic, violence-prone personalities are present in many organizations, mobbing outbreaks manifest themselves in far from all of them. Therefore, in recent decades, researchers focus on organizational factors creating conditions for conflicts that grow into colleague persecution (Cowan et al., 2021; Gulin, 2019; Shvardak et al., 2021). Creation of special preventive programmes for building a positive work environment as well as constructive and efficient methods of fighting such pathologies as mobbing can reduce the likelihood that mobbing will occur (Gulin, 2019). However, the specifics of organizations differ, and in schools, mobbing exists in the context of interactions between teachers, pupils and parents (Čech et al., 2020); therefore, when creating prevention programmes for general education institutions, the specific challenges arising in the complex ecosystem of schools must be understood. This study aims to review and highlight the specific challenges of mobbing prevention in general education institutions.

The research was conducted using a semi-systematic approach, which is also called a narrative review. This approach is useful when it is aimed to provide an overview of a particular problem or topic that distinguishes itself by different conceptualizations or to summarize the state of knowledge and set the agenda for further research (Snyder, 2019). In the first stage of the research, the list of relevant terms, which were used to select articles in scientific databases, was formed. The second stage involved delving into the information given in the abstracts of the articles while selecting and classifying empirical studies. In the third stage, the categories describing the relevant challenges of workplace mobbing prevention were distinguished and discussed.

1. Results and discussion

1.1. The concept of mobbing and its manifestation in organizations

To describe violence causing particularly serious consequences, two terms emphasizing the workplace are often used in the literature: “workplace mobbing” and “workplace bullying”. The first, proposed by Leymann (1993), differentiates bullying of colleagues in the workplace from the term “mobbing” used by researchers investigating animal behaviour. Meanwhile, the second term separates specific conflicts taking place among employees from toxic relationships between pupils. The latter were referred to by Olweus as bullying in the 1970s (Olweus & Breivik, 2014). In order to avoid the confusion of terms, Leymann (1996) proposed using the term “mobbing”, leaving “bullying” exclusively to describe the interrelationships among pupils. Nevertheless, both terms are often used synonymously, although in the workplace context, they describe similar but not identical processes.

According to the definition proposed by Leymann (1996), it is maintained that mobbing is destructive behaviour that the victim experiences for at least six months and at least once a week, when the attack is performed by more than one person (Coskuner et al., 2018; Grzesiuk et al., 2022; Vveinhardt et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the term bullying is used to describe situations in the work environment where constant negative and aggressive behaviour of colleagues or managers is encountered (Samsudin et al., 2018). In the latter case, it is not necessarily indicated how often such behaviour recurs and how long it lasts, how many persons are involved in the attack.

Leymann (1996) grouped mobbing actions according to five contexts of communication in the work environment, when a person suffers in the areas of communication, social relationships, reputation, work tasks and health. The causes of attacks can be the person’s abilities, popularity, age and other factors (Kowal & Gwiazda-Sawicka, 2018; Petrescu & Manghiuc, 2020). Meanwhile, aggressors often distinguish themselves by impulsivity and narcissism (Çetin & Danacı, 2021). The victim’s situation is aggravated by the fact that the person is attacked not by one person but by a group of persons (Efilti et al., 2020; Minibas-Poussard et al., 2018; Shvardak et al., 2021).

The specifics of mobbing determine that it causes huge damage to psychological and physical health, the quality of personal and family life and may lead to suicide (Karmanov et al., 2022; Poirier et al., 2021; Leymann, 1996). At the same time, mobbing has a negative impact on the entire organization, undermining operational efficiency and overall prestige (Coskuner et al., 2018; Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2020; Minárová et al., 2020).

1.2. The specifics of mobbing in general education institutions

The phenomenon in question can be found in every organization, both in the public and private sectors; however, studies show that in the education sector, destructive behaviour attributed to mobbing is still particularly common (Efilti et al., 2020; Shvardak et al., 2021; Vveinhardt, 2010). Although education is an important process in every person's life, helping to become a useful member of the society, it is observed that employees working in this sector face many challenges affecting their job satisfaction and job quality, and one of them is mobbing (Aras, 2019). In addition, it is observed that the quality of interrelationships between employees has been deteriorating in recent decades (Droppa et al., 2018).

Research shows that mobbing is related to teacher burnout (İnandi & Büyüközkan, 2022) and generally increases overall employee turnover in the organization (Shvardak et al., 2021). The most common victims of mobbing are teachers who suffer from school principals (Cemaloğlu, 2008; Efilti et al., 2020). This happens due to power imbalance, as the person occupying a higher position has more power (Tatar & Yüksel, 2019). Meanwhile, school leaders themselves often suffer not from subordinates but from other persons such as parents, representatives of national authorities, etc. (Cemaloğlu, 2008).

Analysing the sociodemographic criteria, it should be accentuated that, as in many other areas of professional activity, the individual's gender is not the criterion that makes him a target of mobbing, unlike the position held and seniority. That is, lower positions and shorter period of employment are associated with greater risk of attacks (Peker et al., 2018; Prevost & Hunt, 2018). Other risk factors, whose management poses specific challenges, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Specific challenges of mobbing prevention in schools

Category	Topic	Source	Year	Country
Management model	Disciplinary supervision poses a high risk of mobbing	Zafar et al.	2022	Pakistan
	The prevailing autocratic management model influences manifestation of mobbing	Peker et al.	2018	Turkey
	Decisions applied by administration affect teacher interrelationships	Uluöz & Yağci	2018	Turkey
	The mobbing phenomenon can be stopped by strengthening communication between administration and teachers on social network	Yağci & Uluöz	2018	Turkey
Administration responses	Workplace bullying attacks where more frequent when there was a major role conflict and low perceived organizational support	Harlos et al.	2023	Canada
	Unsatisfactory administrative assistance was the most important factor that has determined general dissatisfaction with the workplace	Scheeler et al.	2022	USA
	Often administration ignores its subordinates and criticizes them	İnandı & Büyüközkan	2022	Turkey
	The problems teachers face in the workplace are often ignored	Çetin & Danacı	2021	Turkey
	Managers' behaviour related to the lack of understanding of the problem prevents the fight against mobbing	Shvardak et al.	2021	Ukraine
	The spread of the mobbing phenomenon is influenced by an uncontrolled work environment	Yağci & Uluöz	2018	Turkey
	The lack of managerial competence is one of the factors promoting	Vveinhardt	2013	Lithuania

Category	Topic	Source	Year	Country
	manifestation of mobbing			
Lack of information	Limited information about legal procedures related to unethical behaviour worsens the position of teachers in the organization	Çetin & Danacı	2021	Turkey
	A small share of managers is able to identify mobbing and take appropriate actions to deal with it	Shvardak et al.	2021	Ukraine
Personality and context	Teacher exhaustion was positively related to pupils' disruptive behaviour and victimization due to workplace bullying and negatively related to social support from management	Kollerová et al.	2023	Czech Republic
	Teachers work in the environment characterised by excessive requirements, constantly increasing workload, and a lack of supportive resources. This environment promotes stress, anger, disappointment and aggression as well as acts of bullying	Bernstein & Batchelor	2022	South Africa
	Emotional commitment promotes teachers to stay in the organization	Vural & Peker	2018	Turkey
	Having professional knowledge does not guarantee high personal morals and ethics	Wornham	2003	United Kingdom
	Patterns of relationships between teachers, pupils and parents form a specific climate	Čech et al.	2020	Czech Republic
	Pupils and parents indirectly contribute to mobbing by creating negative opinion about the victim	Shvardak et al.	2021	Ukraine

Thus, four areas posing significant challenges can be distinguished, which should be addressed when creating and developing mobbing prevention in general education institutions. Each of them will be briefly discussed below.

1.3. Favourable conditions for manifestation of mobbing in general education institutions

Management model. Management style is one of the key factors influencing behaviour among employees (Uluöz & Yağci, 2018); thus, the choice of the management model can both increase and decrease the risk of mobbing (Peker et al., 2018; Zafar et al., 2022). In addition to that, it is necessary to take into account such risk factors as the organizational structure, long working hours, poor distribution of work, unclear promotion opportunities, etc. (Uluöz & Yağci, 2018).

Heads of general education institutions, applying the autocratic management model, tend to follow strict rules and operate according to a strict hierarchy in their activities (Peker et al., 2018), this way prioritizing not the teacher's psychological state but the necessity of performing assigned tasks, and in case of transgressions, a system of penalties is applied (Zafar et al., 2022). Democratic management, distinguishing itself by flexible decision-making and a more horizontal structure, is associated with a lower risk of mobbing (Yağci & Uluöz, 2018). On the one hand, mobbing has a negative affect on the climate of the educational institution (Akbasli et al., 2020), on the other hand, the better the leaders understand the school climate, the less negative experiences of interpersonal relationships are recorded (Čech et al., 2020).

Administration responses. The response of the educational institution's administration to conflict situations determines further development of teachers' interpersonal relationships. Ignoring teachers' complaints paves the way for the spread of destruction in interpersonal relationships (Çetin & Danacı, 2021). This is one of the main actions of administration, hindering avoidance of mobbing at various levels of the organization (İnandi & Büyüközkan, 2022; Shvardak et al., 2021). Such inadequate reactions are often determined by the lack of knowledge and competence of the management (Shvardak et al., 2021; Vveinhardt, 2013).

Lack of information. The lack of information about the phenomenon, coping opportunities and special knowledge not only aggravates responses but also hinders preventive decision-making. Managers who have sufficient knowledge of human relationships and their management can exert more influence than those who rely only on their status and power (Akbasli et al., 2020). In addition, due to limited access to information or scant opportunities for updating it in various training courses, not only managers but also teachers do not know the laws protecting them, legal documents regulating behaviour in interrelationships, which is why they cannot apply them in practice (Çetin & Danacı, 2021). Therefore, managers cannot evaluate the seriousness of the situation, while the situation is further complicated by reluctance to assume responsibility for decisions (Shvardak et al., 2021).

Personality and social context. Often, important decision-making, reporting inappropriate behaviour to management or leaving the organization are hindered by individual reasons. Individuals who feel emotional commitment to the organization are more likely to stay in the unfavourable work environment (Vural & Peker, 2018). In addition, enduring of colleagues' attacks is promoted by responsibility for the family's financial well-being (Zafar et al., 2022). Another sensitive area is the morale of school employees. Research shows that values and moral aspects of interpersonal relationships play a significant role in conflicts (Deikus, 2017; 2019); therefore, according to Wornham (2003), moral and ethical ideas and related issues must become part of discussions about victimization at work. This would contribute to the development of a clearly defined prevention policy.

Furthermore, a wider social context, whose important part is pupils' parents, must be considered too (Čech et al., 2020; Tretiak, 2022). According to Tretiak (2022), there are situations when parents submit a complaint to the school principal who, without taking a deeper look at the situation, takes the side of parents and tries to force the teacher to resign. Intertwining relationships between parents, pupils, teachers and administration show how specific school environment is. In it, pupils and parents can contribute to the creation of a negative opinion about a particular teacher, this way creating a favourable context for mobbing (Shvardak et al., 2021).

Conclusions

This study aimed to review and highlight challenges of mobbing prevention, arising in the context of general education institutions, which are referred to as specific. The highlighted problems draw the attention of practitioners to sensitive areas of educational organizations and are also significant for further scientific research that would help develop mobbing prevention programmes in educational organizations.

When creating the prevention system, four interrelated groups of problems must be evaluated. The management style applied by managers in the organization can create unfavourable conditions for mobbing to occur or, conversely, promote interpersonal conflicts. The lack of conflict management competencies, which prevents adequate decision-making or promotes ignoring the problem, contributes to that. The lack of knowledge of the phenomenon itself and of the opportunities to deal with it is relevant both for school administration and teachers, whose situation is aggravated by the commitment to the school and family members, which promotes persecution to endure for a long time.

Solving the above-mentioned problems poses challenges not only in the education sector; nevertheless, two topics warrant special attention. The unresolved moral constituent of interpersonal relationships compromises education itself and may contribute to the spread of workplace violence in the long term when present pupils become employees or managers themselves. In addition, general education schools distinguish themselves from other organizations by a specific ecosystem in which interpersonal relationships between pupils, their parents, teachers and administration develop. Pupils and their parents are that group of stakeholders which integrally participates in the life of the organization. Therefore, they should be involved not only in the policy of informing about mobbing issues but also in the discussions on ethical aspects of interpersonal relationships. Thus, a systematic approach must be followed to create preventive programmes and conduct research in general education institutions, enabling not only to evaluate individual and organizational aspects but also to foresee the threats arising in the school's social environment and the ways of minimising them.

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