Students' Involvement in Cyberbullying

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Abstract

The present study sets up to investigate possible changes in the manner of manifesting violence involving middle school and high school students in Suceava county. Taking into consideration the tremendous impact of social networks on establishing means of communication and of free time, it is inevitable for the cybernetic environment to be a place where certain forms of violence can manifest themselves. By applying a questionnaire adapted by A.N.Grigore (2016) and used on the Romanian school population, we have proposed to investigate the incidence of the cyberbullying phenomenon in middle schools and high schools from Suceava county. Once finished, the study confirms cyberbullying isn't a pseudo phenomenon, which justifies the need for nonformal education and school counselling programs to take into cyberbullying into account, as a form of violence in which students might be involved.

Key words: cyberbullying, violence, online environment

1.Introduction

The development of new technologies has led to a spectacular increase in possibilities of interacting with other people, regardless of geographical distance. Apart from advantages one could have scarcely imagined several years back, these new forms of communication are accompanied by potential risks. The new means of socialising in which young people are involved have also led to the appearance of new forms of manifesting conflicts. Recent research shows that students are involved in new forms of violence through the use of electronic devices and the internet, manifesting themselves through intimidation, harassment and other forms of aggression. Cyberbullying is a term used by experts to define these new forms of violence produced in a virtual environment. N. Willard (2005) affirms that what is specific for cyberbullying is "to be mean to another person by sending or publishing damaging material or by involving oneself in other forms of social aggression using the internet or other types of digital technologies" (Călin, F.M, 2016, p.271).

2. The theoretical context of the researched problem

A.N.Grigore (2015) distinguishes the following forms of violence that are produced by means of electronic devices and of the internet:
- Repeated sending by a certain person of offensive or vulgar messages, through e-mail or any other type of text messaging;

- Virtual stalking which includes threats or excessively intimidating messages;
- Vilification by sending malicious, untrue news about a certain person, or the posting of materials online that can lead to the damaging of someone's image;
- Sending or posting of material that contain personal or embarrassing information, including the redirecting of private messages to strangers;
- Brutal exclusion of a person from an online group.

Another form of cyberbullying with a very great social impact is known as "happy slapping". The "happy slapping" phenomenon is described as an unexpected attack on a victim while the aggressor's friend films what is happening, in order to later distribute the video or to view it repeatedly. The fact that there are two aggressors working together make the victim feel even more damaged (Călin, F.M., 2016, p.273). Moreover, the unexpected attack of the aggression makes the victim think that it can happen at any time.

One of the first studies undergone in order to explore the degree of incidence for cybernetic violence throughout the year 2000 in New Hamsphire shows that 6% of the youth interviewed have been victims of online aggression. In Canada, the percentage of people receiving threatening message online has reached 25%. The same percentage can be found in Great Britain, within the 11-19 age group.

Online safety has become a concern for Romanian experts, considering that most children use at least one social network. According to Romania's Save the Children Organization, 45% of children claim they have been emotionally affected or offended online. At the same time, 22% admit they have viewed or received messages of a sexual nature, 42% of these affirming they have been personally sent a message or image with explicit content, 8% declare they have been asked to speak about sexual acts and 5% say they have been requested a picture or video where they show their private parts (Save the Children Romania. Research report: Study on the use of the Internet in the family, 2015).

Studies in this domain show that violence through the means of electronic devices has certain particularities that differentiate it from traditional forms of violence. Thus, in electronic violence, it is practically impossible for the victim to prevent and distance themselves from these attacks. Another aspect particular to this form of violence is linked to the extremely large audience forming the witnesses to the aggression, as well as the invisibility or anonymity of the aggressor (Cristea, M., 2013, p. 83). The indirect form of aggression makes it impossible, most of the times, for its author to be penalised, and, since the author isn't in direct contact with the victim, he most of the times labels these acts as harmless. The "anonymous" character of online violence creates a protective curtain around the aggressor. According to a study published in 2011, in Canada 21% of young people who were victims of cyberbullying declared they never knew the identity of their virtual aggressor (apud. Drăgulinescu, A., 2018, p.27; Eşi, 2014). Unlike the school yard aggressor, who one can recognise and avoid, the online aggression can seldom be identified and avoided, placing the victim in a state of anxiety and stress.

Studies show that most instigators of certain forms of cyberbullying have taken part in the aggression for the fun of it and not to prove their power in front of their colleagues. Many instigators hold the impression that virtual aggression is a behaviour everyone is involved in and that what takes place in the online world is a game consented to by both parties, lacking in consequences.

While it may appear harmless, any participation in acts of cyberbullying has damaging effects for students. Victims of online violence tend to have, just as victims of physical bullying, lower self-

esteem, feelings of loneliness, disillusion, lack of trust in people. These emotional problems can lead to educational difficulties.

3. Research methodology

The current study wishes to investigate possible changes in the manner of manifesting violence involving middle school and high school students from Suceava county. Taking into account the tremendous impact of social networks in establishing means of communication and of spending free time, it is likely that the cybernetic environment might be a place where certain forms of violence manifest themselves.

The study objectives target:
- Comparing the opinions of students from middle school and highschool regarding the frequency in the school place of direct and online violence;
- Assessing the role that the students' background and home environment might have on the frequency of the investigated forms of violence;
- Assessing the impact of the role the biological gender has in establishing the frequency of direct and online forms of violence from the perspective of the aggressor, the victim and the witnesses.
- Comparing results obtained from the studied group with those obtained from other geographical areas in studies that use similar research methodologies.

The hypotheses targeted were the following:

Hypothesis 1 : There are differences in the perception of forms of bullying and cyberbullying, depending on the level of education the students attend;

Hypothesis 2: There are differences in the way violence is manifested, depending on the students' background;

Hypothesis 3: There are differences in the perception of the frequency of bullying and cyberbullying forms, depending on the place where the school is;

Hypothesis 4: Biological gender influences the manner in which students assess the frequency of online violence, from the perspective of aggressor, victim and witnesses;

Hypothesis 5: There is a great probability that students involved in face-to-face aggression might also initiate different forms of online violence.

The research methodology consists of an investigation through the means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted by A.N.Grigore (2016) and contains 44 items meant to examine the frequency of certain forms of bullying and cyberbullying, from the perspective of the victim, aggressor and witness in the two situations. This tool will be applied to a sample of 425 middle school students and high school students (students from the 7th and 10th grade).

Results and discussions

As far as victimising students in the virtual environment is concerned, the percentage data are significant from the perspective of preventive measures. According to the data obtained, 25,6% of students have declared they have received offensive messages once or twice in the past year, and 13,4% – several times in the past school year. Also, 15% of students admit to receiving threatening and intimidating messages once or twice and 7,5% say they have been threatened several times in the

past school year. A worrying number of students declare they were contacted by persons pretending to be somebody else. Almost 25% of the students undergoing this study claimed they were confronted by impostors on social networks at least once and 9,9% say they were contacted several times in the past school year, by persons using false identities. The students have also admitted they were in the situation of having personal and sensitive information leaked through the distribution of private messages.

Using test T for the independent samples, we were able to identify significant statistical differences up to a $p<0.05$ threshold, between the averages obtained by middle school students and those of high school students, from the perspective of victim and aggressor in acts of online violence. High school students (MD= 3.45) signal more often that they have been victims of online harassment than middle school students (MD=2.56). Also, high school students admit they have involved themselves as instigators/ aggressors (MD=1.67) in cybernetic violence more readily than middle school students (MD=1.28). The same statistical application has allowed us to determine that the frequency of forms of bullying and cyberbullying in schools from the urban areas is more common than in schools from the rural areas, both from the perspective of victimizing students, as well as that of witness to the two forms of violence.

The comparison between environments, as well as the analysis of the Lavene test, indicates a higher frequency of boys acting as aggressors in different forms of traditional violence, as well as in online aggressions. These data confirm previous findings which show that there are no differences between boys and girls as far as online victimization is concerned, as well as the higher incidence of boys when it comes to initiating these types of violence (Grigore, A.N., 2016, Călin, F.M., 2016).

The application of the Pearson correlation test indicates moderate ties, significant from a statistical standpoint, between the following scales: bullying aggressor – cyberbullying aggressor, bullying victim- cyberbullying victim, bullying witness –cyberbullying witness. This aspect indicates the following: 42% of students, victims of direct aggression were also victim of online harassment; 44,9% of traditional aggressors were also involved in online harassment; 51,2% of those declaring they have been present at different forms of bullying have also claimed to have heard that certain classmates were victimised in an online environment. The synthesis of research on role dynamics in bullying and cyberbullying shows that these forms of harassment coexist among students (Grigore, A.N., 2016).

Conclusions

This research confirms that cyberbullying is not a pseudophenomenon. The numbers indicating the frequency of these forms of violence among children and young people are relevant to the importance of educational programs targeting prevention of student victimization. The lack of abilities as far as managing an unpleasant situation the students might be confronted with online stresses the need to instruct them at home and at school concerning the risks and limits of socializing in a virtual environment, similar to the way in which children are taught to draw attention to abuse which might appear during face-to-face interactions.

Student counselling programs for the prevention of victimisation in an online environment can target objectives such as:

- Identifying conducts exposing students to the posture of "victim" or "latent victim";
- Identifying multiple means in which children and young people can be harmed in an online environment;
- Awareness of ways of revealing personal identity in accordance with the right to privacy and dignity;
- Stressing the importance of civilized forms of expression online, respecting the principles of assertiveness.
- Informing students about security measures form modern technological means of communication.

But what must not be forgotten is that an important factor to the development of resilience in that face of this violence is the quality of communication between parent-child, as well as a positive relationship with classmates and teachers.

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