DETECTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE EXPOSURE OF ADOLESCENTS IN SLOVENE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract
The article presents the research the intention of which is to determine the sensitivity of Slovene schools for the recognition of domestic violence exposure of adolescents and to investigate the practice and difficulties of Slovene secondary schools in detecting domestic violence and the resulting actions thereof. The results show that there are big differences between Slovene secondary schools in detecting domestic violence exposure of adolescents. The fear expressed by the teachers and school counsellors concerning their responsibility for intervening in a family is also important because it seems a significant part of the decision-making about reporting domestic violence. The majority of school counsellors interviewed feel helpless after making a report; this could also be related to respondents’ prevailing dissatisfaction with the actions of other institutions. In the procedure of reporting domestic violence a quarter of teachers and school counsellors do not always have the support of the management.

Keywords: domestic violence, adolescent, secondary school, school counsellors

Introduction
Within the framework of domestic violence the abuse of children of all ages is especially problematic. It is a common belief that mostly small children are often abused within the family environment (Filipčič, 2002: 151); whereas when child victims of age above 12 are considered the belief is that an adolescent is capable of being in control of ones own behavioural problems (ibid.) although the adolescents are exposed to similar kinds of violence and even suffer consequences of domestic violence.

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Schools which adolescents attend have continuous contact with them and can therefore present an important environment for recognising the exposure of adolescents to domestic violence. Different authors (e.g. Sterne et al., 2010; Venet et. al., 2007) established that teachers and other school officials can improve living conditions of children and adolescents who have experiences with domestic violence as they have optimal possibilities for recognising the signs of endangerment and reacting to the needs of these children and adolescents.

The article at head presents the research the intention of which is to investigate the practice and difficulties of Slovene secondary schools in detecting exposure to domestic violence and the actions following it.

There are many consequences of violence and also many signs for it however, they are often specific regarding the characteristics of children, the type of violence and other circumstances. A generalisation of the phenomenon is therefore especially risky; knowing all characteristics and circumstances is crucial. School officials (teachers, school counsellors and others) rarely have the opportunity to get to know the child and the family as a whole although they have interactions on a daily basis. We should not neglect numerous factors which make the recognition of the victims and the response of school officials difficult. Mikuš Kos (1993: 28–30) states the principle of respecting the privacy of events in the family and educational treatment of children, educational standards of ones own culture as well as deeper psychodynamic reasons, such as anxiety following the action or identification with the offender as well as fear. A crucial factor is if teachers and other school officials are informed or uninformed; this is what influences the recognition of the signs of domestic violence exposure. McGee (2000), Byrne & Taylor (2007) and Austin (2000) quote the results of various researches which have shown that teachers and other school officials do not often recognise or dare to confirm the violence. Thus Byrne & Taylor (2007: 196) point out that apart from the fear of invasion into private family life and other types of distress, which they meet in this case, there exists also an important lack of suitable qualifications for recognising the signs of domestic violence exposure. Teachers and social workers (ibid.) mentioned in a research of public education in Ireland confirmed their statements that they do not have enough experience and expert knowledge concerning this topic. The findings about obstacles schools face while detecting and solving the problem of domestic violence exposure of children and adolescents can also be seen in the data of other researches on the reactions of schools in discovering cases of domestic violence. The Spanish national survey has shown that concerning the adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years the school
did not report as much as 78% of cases of neglecting the adolescents and domestic adolescent abuse exposure (Gracia, 2003: 41). The schools have reported only those cases where the adolescents themselves reported domestic violence and cases where the forms of violence were obvious (consequences of physical violence) and repeated (ibid.). After the examination of different studies Besharov’s (1993 in: ibid.: 41) findings which concern the reports of domestic violence were similar; namely in cases of physical violence no more than 50% are reported, and in cases of psychological abuse 75% of child abuse is not reported. The research carried out by Abrahams et al. (1992 in: Gracia, 1995: 1084) on the knowledge, experience and opinion on child and adolescent abuse tried among other aspects, to establish the reasons for low sensibility of teachers when perceiving the exposure of children and adolescents to domestic violence, and the reasons for not reporting the violence detected. The teachers stated that important obstacles for reporting these cases are the lack of expert knowledge in this field, the fear of public disclosure, the fear of consequences of reporting the offence, parents’ denial, the fear of interfering in the family’s privacy and the lack of support from schools and society.

**Methodology**

The purpose of our research was to discover the sensibility of school officials in Slovenia for recognising the exposure of adolescents to domestic violence, and to study the practice and difficulties of Slovene secondary schools in the detection domestic violence exposure of adolescents and the actions following it.

**Hypotheses**

Numerous researches (e.g. Gracia, 2003; Besharov, 1993 in: Gracia, 2003, Abrahams et al. in: Gracia, 1995) discovered that the schools reported many more cases of pupils being exposed to physical domestic abuse than cases of psychological domestic abuse exposure; thus we have formed the following hypotheses:

- **hypothesis H1;** school counsellors are more sensible of physical domestic violence exposure of adolescents than other forms of domestic violence.

Various studies (e.g. Mikuš Kos, 1993; Byrne and Taylor, 2007; McGee, 2000; Austin, 2000; Gracia, 2003; Besharov, 1993 in: Gracia, 2003, Abrahams et al. in: Gracia, 1995) have proven that respecting the privacy of family life presents one of the important factors which has an influence on school officials at the level of recognising and reporting domestic violence exposure of children and adolescents. On the basis of these findings we have formed
• hypothesis H2; the decision-making of secondary school counsellors in schools regarding reporting the detected of domestic violence exposure of adolescents is influenced by the evaluation of family privacy.

Regarding the fact that Slovene social work centres invited the schools in 89 cases of proceedings involving children and adolescents via a multidisciplinary team\(^2\) in 2010 (Murgel, 2011: 163) where the schools participated in 83 cases (ibid.), and that what is astonishing in 452 cases the schools were not invited to cooperate in the multidisciplinary team (ibid.), we have formed

• hypothesis H3. We presumed that the majority of school counsellors in the secondary schools are not satisfied with the work of other institutions when dealing with domestic violence exposure of adolescents.

Sample

The sample consisted of school counsellors from 100 secondary schools in the Republic of Slovenia, which represents 75% of all secondary schools. We used the e-mail address database of secondary school counsellors to make a sample; this was provided by the Ministry of education and sport of the Republic of Slovenia, who uses the database for the purpose of registration procedures at secondary schools. A random selection of the addresses from that database provided us with 100 addresses of school counsellors from different schools, whom we have sent the survey questionnaires via e-mail. In order to gain a higher level of response we have personally contacted half of the secondary schools, i.e. their school counsellors by telephone. This is how we reached a cooperation or responsiveness of 60% degree, which means that we have received the answers of 60 school counsellors from different Slovene schools.

The school counsellors interviewed in the research sample were from the following schools: 28 (47%) from grammar schools and 32 (53%) from secondary technical schools.

The majority of the school counsellors interviewed in the sample were educationalists (56,67%) and psychologists (26,67%), there was a smaller number of social workers (5%) and other educational profiles (11,67%).

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\(^2\) In Slovenia interinstitutional cooperation is regulated and stipulated by the Family Violence Prevention Act (Zakon o preprečevanju nasilja v družini, Ul. RS, no. 16/2008).
Method

The interviewing of the school counsellors took place between February and April 2011. The school counsellors have received the survey questionnaires by e-mail. The questions were general (which secondary school programme does the school where they work implement, what profession, the length of service at the school counselling and their gender) as well as 7 units of questions about:

- sensibility of school counsellors toward domestic violence exposure of adolescents (“Have you ever detected a case of domestic violence exposure of students at your school?” (possible answers 1 = yes, 2 = no); “Please list the number of similar cases you detected at your school in the last three years.” (open ended questions); “Which forms of domestic violence have the students been exposed to in the cases detected at your school? Please list the number of such cases according to their different forms in the last three years.” The answers given: “1 = a student has been beaten at home; 2 = a student has been neglected at home; 3 = a student has been exposed to psychological abuse as a witness of violence between parents; 4 = a student has been exposed to other forms of psychological abuse; 5 = a student has been sexually abused within the family”);

- reporting the cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents (“Who in your own experience most often detects domestic violence exposure of a student at your school?” (possible answers were: 1 = a class teacher, 2 = schoolmates, 3 = a school counsellor, 4 = others; with the answer number 4 we asked the respondents to list who that person was); “Please write the way the situation was dealt with in these cases and with what number of students.” (the answers offered were: “1 = we have made/filed a report at the social work centre; the number, 2 = we have filed a report to the police; the number, 3 = a student felt strongly against reporting, therefore we have not proceeded with it; the number, 4 = we have not filed a report because the parents claimed the opposite of the student; the number, 5 = we have not filed a report as we were against the interfering with the family; the number, 6 = other; number”);

- the satisfaction over the actions of other institutions which have dealt with the students who have been exposed to domestic violence (“Please explain the reasons for (not) being satisfied with further actions of other institutions, and what is the number of these cases.”);

- cooperation with class teachers (“Please evaluate the cooperation of the class teachers with the school counselling service when trying to solve the issue in student’s favour.” We have prepared the answers: “1 = the majority of class teachers have shown an interest in solving
the problem, and have cooperated well, 2 = approximately half of the
class teachers have shown an interest in solving the problem, and
have cooperated well, 3 = the majority of the class teachers have not
shown an interest for solving the matter, and have not shown the wish
to cooperate, 4 = other”);

- cooperation with the school’s management (“Please, evaluate the
  cooperation of the principal when solving the issue in favour of the
  student.” The school counsellors surveyed could choose among the
  following answers: “1 = the principle of the school has always
  supported my decision to report the parents, 2 = the principle of the
  school has mostly supported my decision to report the parents, 3 =
  the principle of the school has mostly not supported my decision to
  report the parents.”);

- the feelings of school counsellors about solving the issue of domestic
  violence exposure of adolescents (“Have you ever felt helpless when
  you wanted to solve this issue despite reporting the case of domestic
  violence?” We have devised a 4-level scale of answers “1 = yes,
  always, 2 = yes, often, 3 = yes, but rarely, 4 = no, never”, and asked
  school counsellors to explain the answer.);

- evaluation/assessment of the influence of fear of responsibility on
  teachers’ detection of domestic violence exposure of adolescents
  (“Please evaluate how strongly the fear of responsibility influences the
  detection of domestic violence exposure.” We have made a 3-level
  scale of answers: “1 = it has a strong influence, 2 = it has some
  influence, 3 = it has no influence.”).

Results

We have discovered that 15% of school counsellors interviewed have no
experience with detecting domestic violence exposure of adolescents
within a family or have not discovered even one case of domestic
violence exposure of adolescent during their length of service at their
school.
Information about whether a school has ever detected a case of domestic violence exposure of adolescents represents an important indicator of general sensibility of school officials towards domestic violence exposure of adolescents. On a basis of the data presented in the figure 1 the majority (85%) of schools and school counsellors interviewed have detected a case of domestic violence exposure of adolescents at least once. Considering the fact that some school counsellors have been working in the school counselling service for only a few years we cannot conclude that if they have not detected domestic violence exposure of adolescents yet, they are not sensible for detecting domestic violence exposure of adolescents at all. But as it is visible from the figure no. 1, 8,3% of the counsellors with longer or long length of service have never detected a case of domestic violence exposure of adolescents.

3 Counsellors have various lengths of service, therefore, we have divided them into two groups: the group of those with the length of service in the school counselling service from 1 to 15 years, and the group of those with the length of service in the school counselling service from 16 to 35 years.
an adolescent nor has it been detected by other employees during their time at school.

The schools also differ in the number of detected cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents in the period of the last three years (between the years 2008 and 2011). 77% of schools where they detected domestic violence exposure of adolescents by themselves the number of the cases detected varies largely between one and fifteen cases at one (the same) school. In this period the schools have most frequently detected one to three cases of domestic violence exposure of their adolescents.

There are also differences in the frequency of detecting individual forms of violence which adolescents are exposed to. This is presented in the figure no. 2 below.

Figure 2: The number and maximum of detected cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents abuse at schools (in the period between 2008 and 2011) in the school counsellors research sample from one to fifteen years (48,3% of all in the sample) and the group of those with the length of service from sixteen to thirty-five years (51,7% of all in the sample).
Considering the fact that observing violence (to be a witness of violence) is a form of psychological abuse, the number of all detected cases of all forms of psychological abuse in Slovene society together (witnesses of violence and other forms of psychological abuse) was been the highest – an astounding 99 cases. The following form of domestic violence exposure of adolescents (considering the number of all cases detected (218) at the schools of the school counsellors interviewed) is the physical abuse or battering (55 cases). There was a small number of detected forms of sexual abuse of adolescents.

Attention should be given to data about maximal number of detected cases of exposure to individual forms of violence at individual schools. The findings conclude that a very high degree of sensibility for domestic violence is characteristic for individual schools – this is evident with negligence as almost a quarter of all detected cases (10 of 45 cases) of negligence expressed by the respondents from the schools in our sample has been detected at only one school.

We tried to establish a general sensibility of school officials regarding the total number of detected cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents in the last three years – in the period between 2008 and 2011 (0 cases = no sensibility, 1 case = low sensibility, 2 to 3 cases = medium sensibility, 4 and more cases = high sensibility).
The data on sensibility of school officials in the figure no. 3 show great differences between schools. The answers of the school counsellors interviewed reveal that 21.7% of schools were not sensible for any of the forms of domestic violence exposure of adolescents in the period of the last three years. These schools and the ones with a very low degree of sensibility for domestic violence exposure of adolescents (the schools where no more than one case of the exposure was found) combined are of the same percentage (35%) as the schools where high sensibility is characteristic (more than four cases detected); this amount is also 35%. Concerning the given hypothesis we were mostly interested in the comparison of sensibility of school counsellors to physical and other forms of domestic violence exposure of adolescents.

Figure 4: The comparison of individual forms of domestic violence regarding the share of schools or school officials who recognised one or more cases of adolescents being exposed in the period between 2008 and 2011
We have discovered that the highest number (58.3%) of schools and school officials interviewed recognised at least one case of physical abuse exposure of adolescents. The schools where negligence and sexual abuse of adolescents were detected are the fewest. On a basis of empirical data we can establish that hypothesis H1, which presumed that school officials interviewed are more sensible of domestic physical abuse exposure of adolescents than for other forms of domestic violence, has been partially confirmed by the number of detected cases of individual forms of domestic violence at schools from our sample and regarding the shares of the schools’ recognition of the exposure to individual forms of domestic violence.

The highest number of schools where the interviewed school counsellors work discovered at least one case of physical violence exposure of adolescents in the period between 2008 and 2011. However, as it has already been shown in the figure no. 2, the total number of all cases of physical domestic violence exposure detected at schools in our research sample is almost half lower than the total number of detected cases of indirect and direct adolescent abuse together.
Chi-square tests showed that the sensibility of the interviewed school counsellors is not influenced by the secondary school programme carried out by the school, nor by the length of service and the level of education of school counsellors. There are no statistically significant differences in the sensibility of school counsellors for recognising domestic violence exposure of adolescents regarding the secondary school programme ($\chi^2 = 0.082; p > 0.05$), regarding the level of education ($\chi^2 = 0.464; p > 0.05$) and the length of service ($\chi^2 = 0.568; p > 0.05$) of the school counsellors interviewed.

We were also interested in how many interviewed school counsellors decided to file a police or social work centre report in cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents detected in the last three years. For this reason we were trying to establish how many interviewed school counsellors reported at least one case of detected exposure of adolescents to a social work centre or the police. The results have shown that 10% of interviewed school counsellors have never decided to report detected domestic violence exposures. If we add the schools where the interviewed school counsellors have not detected cases of domestic violence exposure of adolescents in the last years (see figure no. 3), this presents 33.3% or one third of the schools (where the school counsellors were interviewed) which have never detected or reported a case of domestic violence exposure of adolescents. We also wanted to establish the number of interviewed school counsellors who did not decide to file a report a detected exposure of adolescent either because the adolescent – the victim – opposed, or because the parents claimed something completely different than the adolescent or because they did not want to interfere with the family or out of other reasons. The results are shown in the figure no. 5.
The data gained shown in the figure no. 5 illustrates that the most common reason (27% of cases) for the interviewed school counsellors’ decision not to file a report on domestic violence detected is the opposition of the adolescents who were the victims of abuse.

20 % of interviewed school counsellors did not decide to file a report on detected adolescent abuse exposure because of the contradictory opinions of the parents and 8,3% of interviewees did not file a report on detected violence exposure because they did not want to interfere with the family. Considering these results about the influence of the family and parents on decision-making of school counsellors about reporting detected domestic violence our predictions in the hypothesis H2, which presumed that valuation of the family’s privacy has an influence on the decisions of secondary school counsellors about reporting the detection of domestic violence exposure of adolescents can be proven. The decisions of almost one third of the interviewed school counsellors (20% of those who considered the parents’ arguments and 8,3% of those who did not want to interfere with the family) to report detected domestic
violence exposure of adolescents were influenced by valuation of the family.

We were also interested in the existence of the connection between the individual forms of violence and decisions of school counsellors to file a report. It turned out that the report to a social work centre has a statistically important connection with the detected cases of sexual abuse \( (r = 0.383; p < 0.01) \), with the detected cases of adolescents being the witnesses of domestic violence \( (r = 0.318; p < 0.05) \) as well as with the detected exposure of adolescents to other forms of psychological abuse \( (r = 0.285; p < 0.05) \). However, the decision of the school counsellors interviewed not to report the violence because the parents claimed different facts have statistically important connections with the detected negligence \( (r = 0.288; p < 0.01) \). The decision of interviewed school counsellors not to report with the families where physical abuse is detected is statistically significant \( (r = 0.283; p < 0.05) \).

Despite these data we are surprised by the fact that school counsellors decide more easily to file a report in cases of different forms of psychological abuse than physical abuse, which leaves “visible marks”. An important finding is also that numerous counsellors feel powerless at and after reporting the violence. 22.4% of interviewees always feel helpless and 59.2% often. Just 8.2% do not know the feeling and 10% feel it occasionally. School counsellors describe the feeling of powerlessness as a result of the fear that after filing the report the situation will worsen for the child. They also doubt about the benefits the child could gain from it. They say that they have negative experience with the victims not being protected and with unsuccessful actions of the social work centres. Open ended questions where we were asking school counsellors to explain why they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the further actions (after filing the report) of other institutions have shown that they were not satisfied with the actions of other institutions. On the basis of the analysis of the empirical data gained we have established that the hypothesis H3, where we predicted that the majority of secondary school counsellors is not satisfied with the actions of other institutions when dealing with exposure to adolescent domestic abuse, is confirmed as this dissatisfaction was expressed by 70% of interviewees. The reasons the interviewed school counsellors list as the cause for dissatisfaction are mostly long duration of procedures and slow work of social work centres and courts, the lack of feedback and cooperation of the social work centres with schools. They also expressed the concern that social work centres do not act in favour of adolescents but even work to their disadvantage and (too) often believe parents and not the victim. Among individual reasons the interviewees listed as the reasons
of dissatisfaction is constant changing of social workers in charge of an individual proceeding.

The interviewed school counsellors stated that they have very different experience in dealing and cooperating with different units of social work centres. The ones who expressed contentment with the mentioned level (29.7%) listed completely opposite arguments as the ones who expressed dissatisfaction. Quick response of the police and social work centres, good cooperation with social work centres and crisis response centres were especially stressed. The stated shows huge differences among individual social work centres in practice as they act and respond with different speeds and enthusiasm in different procedures concerning the adolescents who were exposed to domestic violence.

Conclusion

Slovene secondary schools vary regarding the sensibility for recognising domestic abuse exposure of adolescents. There are differences in the number of cases detected as well as in the frequency of detecting individual forms of violence the adolescents are exposed to. The highest number of schools where the interviewed school counsellors have been working detected at least one case of physical abuse exposure of adolescents in the period of three years. However, the total number of all cases of detected physical domestic abuse at all the schools in our research sample was almost smaller by half of the total number of detected cases of indirect and direct adolescent abuse together, which again confirms huge differences in sensibility for domestic violence among the individual schools. There is no statistically significant influence of factors in recognition of domestic violence such as the level of education, the length of service and the gender of the school counsellors as well as the secondary school programme the school implements. However, our opinion is that the valuation of the majority of interviewed school counsellors (90%) shows that the perception of domestic violence exposure of adolescents is influenced by the fear of responsibility; this is important for the understanding of the sensibility of the school counsellors. More than one third (34%) even estimate that the teachers’ fear of responsibility for interfering in a family has a very strong impact. Therefore, by Bouwkamp (1993:13, 14), we should not disregard the fact that an expert (social worker, psychologist, educationalist, teacher etc.) can find oneself in a role of a “scared child” when he/she discovers the child’s exposure to domestic violence. The stated explains why the fear of the school officials of taking the responsibility for breaking the family where the child abuse happened (ibid.). Bouwkamp’s findings (1993: 13, 14) are reflected in our results about reporting detected domestic adolescent abuse exposure. Even though the
interviewed school counsellors who ever detected a case of domestic adolescent abuse exposure relatively often decide to file a report on domestic violence despite the judicial obligation\(^4\) but do not always decide to do so. An important influence on their decision-making has the valuation of the family and also the wish of adolescents not to report their violence exposure. The valuation of a family and its privacy influenced the decision-making of almost a third of interviewed school counsellors not to report detected domestic adolescent abuse exposure. Beside all these difficulties and dilemmas a good quarter of interviewed school counsellors face the problem of inadequate support or they are even without a support of a school management or a principle. We are surprised by the result that school counsellors decide more easily to file a report in cases of different forms of psychological abuse than physical abuse, which leaves “visible marks”. The result is especially interesting because various other researches (e.g. Gracia, 2003; Besharov, 1993 in: Gracia, 2003, Abrahams et al. in: Gracia, 1995) proved quite the opposite. Namely, schools report substantially more detected cases of physical domestic abuse exposure of students than detected cases of psychological domestic abuse exposure. The majority of school counsellors who reported detected domestic abuse exposure despite filing a report of detected adolescent domestic abuse exposure feel powerless occasionally or even most of the time because they worry about the adolescents’ benefits and protection and take care that their situation does not worsen. The latter can be connected to predominant dissatisfaction of the interviewed school counsellors with the actions of other institutions and with detected inadequate interinstitutional cooperation. The school counsellors interviewed are mainly dissatisfied especially with the procedures of social work centres\(^5\) and courts and miss the interinstitutional cooperation.

We can conclude that in order for schools to be more efficient in the field of detecting and helping the adolescents who are exposed to domestic violence as well as prevention acts it would be necessary for schools to plan not only help and protection of abused adolescents but also training and support for teachers and other school officials with detection and support for victims. From the viewpoint of domestic violence the school presents an important environment with an important role for the child or

\(^{4}\) Family Violence Prevention Act (ZPND 2008: 5. Article) obliges the school officials to file a report on domestic violence suspicion.

\(^{5}\) When surveying the satisfaction of the school counsellors with the work of social work centres we have to emphasise that school counsellors stress huge differences in the work of individual social work centres and that almost 30% of school counsellors are satisfied with the work of social work centres and the police.
adolescent who is exposed to domestic violence as well as for the wider social environment and despite this fact or just because of it the school cannot solve the domestic violence issue on its own. It can present only one segment of solving this issue. Therefore the connections between different institutions: schools, social work centres, health care, the police, the prosecution and judicature are very important; raising the awareness of the entire public is also very important. In the field of awareness-rising of the entire public which highly values the family and its intimacy and a closed position we will have to do a lot to even dare to see the signs and the consequences of the domestic child and adolescent abuse. An important braking factor which influences the prevention and detection and solving the problem of domestic child and adolescent abuse exposure are definitely stable cultural beliefs and family stereotypes. Because of that the school as a carrier of knowledge has an even more important and at the same time substantially more demanding role.

Resources


6 Similar as in other European countries all Slovenes put the evaluation of the family always on the first place; the same happened in the last SJM research (Toš, 2007: 6,7).


