

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ON PEER VIOLENCE

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Abstract— Nowadays, peer violence is a phenomenon we encounter on a daily basis, to which many children are exposed. In order to prevent it in time, it is extremely important to recognize it and observe it from a child's perspective. The aim of this study, which was conducted among primary and secondary school students, with regard to age and gender, type and location of the school, was to investigate how peer violence is viewed by those who are most exposed to it, as well as to examine the occurrence frequency of certain forms of violence. The results confirm that peer violence is a common occurrence in school and that boys are more likely to take part in it, either by experiencing it or by inflicting it. A statistically significant difference can be seen in the respondents' attitudes on the forms of violence, where it is evident that boys are more exposed to physical violence, and that the most common form of peer violence among students is psychological (verbal) violence, i.e. derision, mockery, name calling, insulting, calling out. Although 49.1% of students claim that, with regard to gender, boys are more prone to peer violence, the fact that 34.3% of students claim that both girls and boys are equally prone to violence should not be disregarded. On the path to growing up, peer violence can leave a serious, and in some cases permanent, mark. The obtained results have been interpreted within the context of existing knowledge on peer violence, and the implications for further work have been highlighted.

Index Terms— school, student, peer violence,

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite a number of preventative and educational programs, peer violence is still a very current problem. It does not choose gender, time or place, and is becoming a more prevalent form of behaviour. It comes in many forms and is not predetermined for boys only. Both genders are equally exposed to it, as those who inflict violence and those who are exposed to it. We are talking about peer violence when one or more children intentionally attack and harass another child, who cannot defend himself/herself, with the aim of causing them physical or psychological pain, not once, but repeatedly. The consequence of violence is the isolation of the individual from the group, society, and the wider community. According to Olweus' most quoted definition (Pregrad et al., 2007, p. 12), peer violence is "a situation of disproportionate strength in which a student is repeatedly and permanently exposed to negative acts by one or more peers." Peer violence used to have a completely different meaning, when, mostly harmless, peer mischief and even physical poking or nudging, did not imply violence. Until the early 1970s, the modern notion of peer violence was alien and marginalized. But since then, peer violence has taken on a completely new meaning; it is present daily inside and outside schools and affects a large number of children. There are various forms of violence: the most trivial mocking, derision directed at the social status of the victim, family situation, way of dressing, simple quarrelling, or, on the other hand, severe psychophysical abuse. The most vulnerable groups include primary and secondary school students, equally boys and girls. Olweus (1998) states that about 15% of Norwegian primary and secondary school students are involved in peer violence, with 9% of them experiencing it, and 7% inflicting violence. In the context of peer violence (Coloroso, 2004), the most frequently mentioned are physical, verbal and relational violence (violence through relationships). However, the most common form of violence among children

remains verbal violence, which is primarily reflected in teasing and name-calling. Such violence does not create physical trauma, but is a direct indicator of psychological trauma, which is more painful and more difficult to treat. Under the influence of peers, certain children can experience a complete change in behaviour or conversion (Hewstone, Stroebe, 2003). It has been proven that children, regardless of age, are capable of subtly finding the words that will cause discomfort, and that this will, consequently, if an individual is exposed to such behaviour over a longer period of time with the aim of being belittled and thus distanced from the group, be a sufficient indicator of violence. According to E. M. Field, (2004, p. 3) *girls are more exposed to verbal, emotional, and social violence, including constant teasing, mocking, belittling, isolation, and spreading of vicious rumours, which teachers tend to notice less frequently.* Although physical violence is more resorted to by boys, research has shown that this form of violence is not alien to girls either and that it can sometimes be even more cruel for this group. However, the desire to prove themselves is more characteristic of boys; they want to show their domination by violence, which they repeat over a long period. Relational violence is not so intrusive but can be very painful for the victim. It includes ignoring the victim, mocking them, avoiding, and isolating an individual from the group, which corresponds to psychological violence. The victim is indirectly exposed to threatening glances, provocative scowls, blackmail, and unwanted comments. Bilić (2003) divides the two basic forms of violence, physical and verbal, into four subtypes: sexual, economic, psychological, and emotional violence. Although sexual peer violence is rarely publicly discussed, the fact is that it is present not only between genders, but also within them. Students use cellphones to record their peers, and then use the images to inflict psychological pain, mockery and derision. Bilić, Buljan Flander and Hrpka (2012), based on the literature overview in this field, mention cultural violence

among peers, which involves insulting an individual on the basis of their nationality, religious affiliation, or race, as a separate form of violence.

Violence always has two sides – one that potentiates it, and the other that is exposed to it. And which factors are indicators of peer violence? The first and perhaps most important factor, which can be classified as one of the causes of peer violence, is the family itself and family relationships. In other words, many of the traits the child develops within the family as the base institution for the adoption of certain norms of behaviour, and the relationships formed within it greatly contribute to the child's behaviour in society. Lack of warmth and attention in family relationships, exposure of the child to violent behaviour at home, as pointed out by Bilić (2003), combined with inadequate supervision and care for the child, are risk factors for the development of violent behaviour. A child who witnesses daily quarrels in the family or is present at the time of physical conflicts in the family is a potential abuser as well. Another factor are schools, which are becoming fosterers of peer violence. As children start school, it becomes more present and more pronounced. If a child tries to distance himself or herself from the group, if he or she is verbally and, frequently, physically hurt and if this happens repeatedly over a longer period of time, the result is peer violence. The role of the school as an institution at the moment of discovering and suppressing of the deviant forms of behaviour is extremely important. It should act preventively, adopt rules and regulations, create a positive school and classroom environment, and in cases of more severe peer violence, it needs to have a well-developed crisis intervention plan. Many, such as Maleš and Stričević (2005), point out that the school environment should be warm and acceptable for all students. In order for this to happen, there must exist clear rules of conduct, both among the students and between teachers and students. The culture of youth behaviour in society and the society itself have an impact on creating a social climate that, if triggered by negative behaviours, will itself be the trigger for violent behaviour among children. A negative youth environment, which is reflected in belonging to a particular social group, and which seeks to stigmatize an individual, causes violent behaviour. If a child grows up in an environment that supports and does not sanction violent behaviour, he or she will adopt it as a norm, and will consequently use it in interactions with other children. More recently, use of modern media as a means of communication has become increasingly widespread among young people; therefore, it can be emphasized that such media are also among the causes of violent behaviour. Coloroso (2004, p. 137) notes that children are *saturated with live images in media that glorify violence as a legitimate solution to a problem; they are not being taught peaceful ways to resolve a conflict*. Using the internet, children have at their fingertips movie and video game

content showing violence as a form of accepted behaviour for achieving goals, prestige in society, group, school and class. By copying such behaviour, a child becomes violent, consciously using modern technology for the purpose of belittling, mocking, insulting another child with the aim of causing him or her psychological pain. The goal of bullying is to distance a child from society. Willard (2004) defines electronic violence, or *cyberbullying*, as sending and publishing harmful texts or images through the internet or other digital means of communication. Multiple studies have confirmed that 96% of primary school students in Croatia own a cellphone, and that 85% of children have internet access (Pregrad et al, 2011), UNICEF report, but that this form of violence is still less frequent than verbal violence. A survey conducted in the United States (Limbred et al., 2013) confirmed that electronic violence is the rarest form of peer violence, with about 5% students experiencing it, compared to, for example, verbal violence, which affects about 17% of the students. Electronic violence is becoming increasingly more common among secondary school students, which has been confirmed by the results of a recent survey conducted in Croatia, which showed that 29.4% of students experienced online violence (Đuraković, Šincek, and Tomašić, 2014). This violence is also characterized by the fact that children are not exposed to it only during their school time. The victim can be exposed to it 24/7, and the abuser can, if he or she wishes, stay anonymous, hiding his or her identity behind a fictitious name. This makes it more difficult to identify the abuser.

Peer violence at school can be manifested through different forms of bullying, done by an individual or a group of students, and is mainly directed towards one other student. Certainly, every child has witnessed some form of violence at least once in their lives. It could have been an exposure to the violence from their peers, and maybe they personally showed some intolerance and aggression towards another individual; in other words, they somehow witnessed violence, be it in the role of a victim or an abuser. Recent research has mostly highlighted the consequences of violence for victims, while lately, research is being focused on the fact that the violence has negative effects on eyewitnesses as well (Gini et al., 2008). All of the above generates the need to analyze the context of bullying and to view violence as a group phenomenon in which participants have different roles (Salmivali et al., 1996; Gini, 2006; Popadić 2009). A survey by the Child Protection Centre (Buljan Flander, 2010) shows that 19% of the children are victims of violence, 8% perpetrators of violence, 8% are both victims and perpetrators, while Velki and Vrdoljak (2013) have obtained results pointing to 30.9% of victims, 3.1% of perpetrators, and 13.7% of perpetrators/victims of the same age. Although the school is an educational institution where, in addition to obtaining knowledge in certain subject matter, children also obtain the norms of polite behaviour towards

other members of community and is a space where peer violence is met with a zero-tolerance rate, the reality shows something completely different. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly work on developing relationships among teachers and students, and among students themselves. Interpersonal relationships are crucial in combating peer violence. Oxford Dictionary (1989) describes violence as the use of physical force with purpose of hurting or intimidating another person. It is an abuse of power with the aim of accomplishing something or influencing something. *Violence involves the initial desire to cause pain, and this desire is expressed by the act of causing pain. The act is committed by a more powerful person or group, it has no justification, it is usually repeated, and is done with obvious pleasure* (Ken Rigby, 1998, as cited by Field, E. M., 2004, p. 18). Teasing and mocking are also a form of violence if used to deliberately humiliate another student. Those who are most exposed to teasing, mocking and/or name-calling are students who are somehow different. They are the children who stand out from others; maybe they are overweight or belong to a family of lower social status, they are not well-dressed or have a physical disability. In contrast to these children, children who achieve poor performance in school are also exposed to this violence, but so are individuals who achieve good results, which causes envy and jealousy among other children. Such children are withdrawn, shy, quiet in their demeanor and generally do not want to confront their abuser. Only after a long time will they disclose their psychological anguish as the result of bullying. Unfortunately, it tends to happen that school as an institution cannot respond to such forms of violence in a timely manner, because they are found out when it is already too late. Sometimes the reason is that the violence occurs during the recess or after school, and children do not talk about it unless it is *a priori* some form of verbal/psychological abuse, rather than physical. The results of research conducted in Croatian schools by Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb (2014) have confirmed that non/verbal forms of violence are more common than physical forms, and the most common form of verbal violence is gossiping. Maleš and Stričević (2005) place gossiping in the context of social abuse. It happens when someone is being persistently ignored, rejected, excluded from a group; that is, when an individual is spreading malicious gossip about another individual. Boys are more likely to resort to physical violence, while girls are more exposed to psychological verbal violence. Girls generally hang out in smaller homogeneous groups, while boys are more open to socializing and resorting to heterogeneous peer groups and are thus more vulnerable to violence. *Boys usually, Coloroso (2004, pp. 34–35) emphasizes, play in large, barely defined groups, brought together by common interests. They establish a strong hierarchy that is clearly defined and respected. Physical abilities are respected more than intellectual ones. Girls, however, have a more powerful weapon in their arsenal – violence*

through relationships. Compared to boys, girls play in smaller, more intimate circles with clearly defined boundaries, making it easier to hurt another girl by simply excluding her from the social circle. Because the school is a place where there is no difference between different forms of violence, no matter whether it is boys who are exposed to it, or only girls, whether we are talking about violence between genders or age groups, its task is multiplied in its preventative role. It is necessary to encourage children to care for one another and provide protection if needed. This should be a core task of schools, that have a mission to *educate children for lasting change* (Porter, Smith-Adcock, 2011, p. 203). The school, through its educational actions and properly chosen methods, if the problem was detected in a timely manner, can prevent the negative incidence of peer violence, which, if it becomes the accepted form of communication among the youth in a very sensitive period of growing up, can become a model of social life.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this research, conducted among primary and secondary school students, was to investigate how peer violence is viewed by those most vulnerable to it. Based on a clearly defined goal, the following tasks were set:

1. Determine frequency of occurrence of peer violence among primary and secondary school students and determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers with regard to gender.
2. Examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in respondents' answers regarding forms of violence.
3. Investigate and analyze whether there is a statistically significant difference in respondents' answers regarding the time when violence occurs in school with regard to age, gender, grade, and type of school.
4. Examine and determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in respondents' answers on peer violence with regard to age, gender, grade, and type of school.

2.1 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- Peer violence is a common occurrence and is more prevalent among boys.

- There is a statistically significant difference in respondents' attitudes on forms of peer violence.
- There is a statistically significant difference in respondents' attitudes on the time when violence occurs in school with regard to age, gender, grade, and type of school.
- There is a statistically significant difference in respondents' attitudes on peer violence with regard to age, gender, grade, and type of school.

For this paper, the theoretical analysis method and the Survey method were used. Using the Survey method, the opinions and attitudes of the respondents were examined, data and material were collected, and then analyzed and synthesized.

To test the measuring instrument, an analysis of the metric characteristics of items and the whole scale was performed using the standard Reliability procedure from the SPSS statistical package. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient, as an indicator of internal homogeneity, for this scale is 0.851, and we can say that the internal consistency of the scale is satisfactory and that the scale has a satisfactory validity. The results were processed in the Statistical Program for Social Scientists 17 (SPSS17), and the obtained results were tabulated and explained.

The research involved 324 students; 146 finishing primary school students and 178 secondary school students from Split-Dalmatia County in the Republic of Croatia. Of the total number of primary school students, 89 (27.5%) are seventh-grade students, and 65 (20.1%) eight-grade students. Of the total number of secondary school students, 25 (7.7%) first-year students, 72 (22.2%) second-year students and 79 (22.5%) third-year students were surveyed. Of the total number of respondents, 164 were male (51.3%) and 160 were female (48.7), aged 12 to 17.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the total number of respondents, 91.4% state that peer violence is present in the school they attend, while 9.6% deny the presence of peer violence.

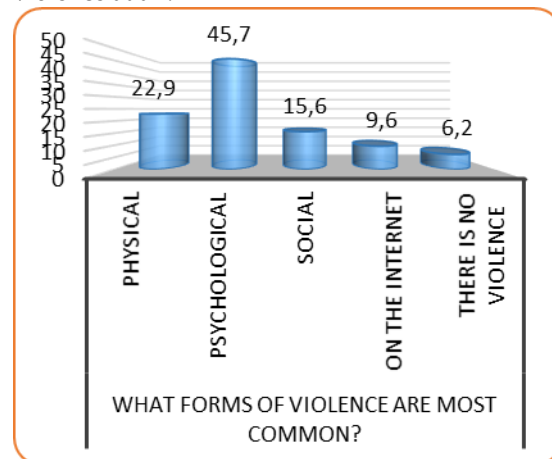
Wanting to determine which gender is more likely to commit violence, we conducted a chi-square test and obtained a score of 24,578 at a significance level of $P=0.001$. After the analysis of the individual responses, it became evident that the respondents mostly opted for the answer that violence is most prevalent among boys. The finding that boys are more prone to peer violence, both as victims and perpetrators, has been confirmed by more recent research (Juvonen, Graham & Schuster, 2003; Undheim und Sund, 2010). Numerous studies have shown that, although boys are more likely to be perpetrators, there are no gender differences in experiencing

violence (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004; Scheithauer, 2006). Some studies, however, have shown that girls are more likely to experience peer violence, at least in some age groups (Hemphill et al., 2012). When it comes to certain types of violence, such as verbal irrational (Arslan et al., 2012), the results also indicated that boys and girls are equally likely to commit violence, except in the case of direct physical violence, which is more often among the boys.

Furthermore, we wanted to determine what forms of violence are most common; physical (hitting, pinching, mocking...), social (exclusion from the groups...), internet violence (social networks) or whether the respondents think there is no violence in their midst.

As the most common form of peer violence, the questioned primary and secondary school students named psychological (verbal) violence, such as derision, mocking, name-calling, insults etc. 45.7% of all students opted for this type of violence. The results show that both boys and girls tend to primarily mention forms of psychological verbal violence. According to the results, derision, mockery, and humiliation are the most common forms of violence. The value obtained by the chi-square test is 23,056 at the $P=0.001$ level of significance in favour of this type of violence.

Another frequent type of violence is physical violence, which 22.9% of students have opted for. Although it is less frequent than psychological violence, physical violence is still inflicted, but also suffered by a significant number of students. 15.6% of students opted for the social form of violence. With this form of peer violence, the results of which are not negligible, the victim is systematically ignored with the aim of reducing their self-esteem, which then contributes to the isolation and avoidance of society. It is interesting to point out that the smallest percent of respondents opted for the violence through the internet, i.e. using social networks, with only 9.6%, and 6.2% of respondents believe there is no peer violence at all.



Graph 1. Representation of respondents' views on forms of violence

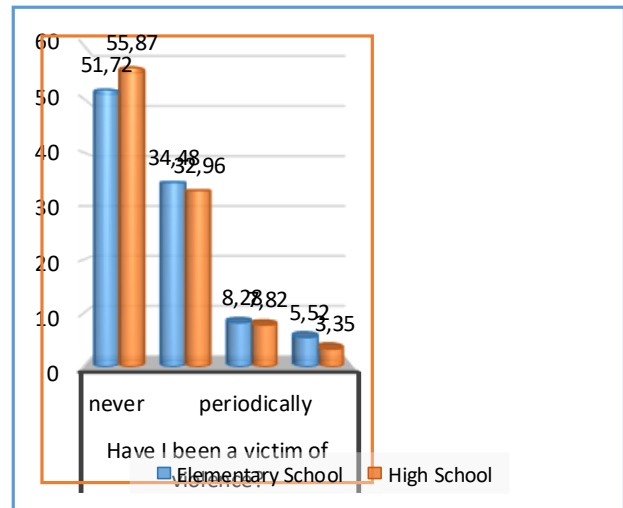
According to the results, the most of peer violence happens after school (54.9%) and during the recess (53.3%), while it is less present during certain classes – 17.6%. Before the beginning of the classes, there is 33.7% of violence. During classes, peer violence is most prevalent in Physical and Health Education (21.7%), in Religious Studies 10.5%, in Math 9.9%, in Croatian Language and History 8.3%, in Art 7.7%, in Music Class 5.6%, while in Computer Sciences that number is only 5.5%.

To determine and verify that the measurement values had a statistically significant difference for respondents, we used the Mann-Whitney U test. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1. The analysis of the obtained results did not establish a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers with regard to gender, age, class, and type of school.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney U Test

	Mann-Whitney U	Z	P
Gender	12002	-1,465	0,143
Age	10342	-0,899	0,368
Grade	2729	-0,657	0,511
Type of school	12340	-0,840	0,401

The value obtained through the Mann-Whitney U test for gender equals MW=12002 at the significance level of P=0.143, for age this number is MW=10342 at the significance level of P=0.368, for grade MW=2729 at the significance level of P=0.511, and for the type of school MW=12340 at the significance level of P=0.401. The results show that peer violence is present in both primary and secondary schools, regardless of gender and age. In conclusion, peer violence is evidently present in students' school life, and if it is not prevented, it could leave serious traumas for the child's psychophysical development.



Graph 2. Representation of students' attitudes about experiencing school violence

One of the aims of this research was also to determine how many of the respondents were a victim of school violence. 48.28% of primary school students stated they were rarely, occasionally, or often in a situation where peer violence was directed at them. The situation is similar in secondary schools, where students state that 44.14% of them were victims of violence, which is extremely devastating data that supports the proactive approach to prevention of peer violence in our educational institutions. The results support the fact that, regardless of gender, age, grade and type of school, the respondents' answers did not differ significantly, indicating that peer violence is present in both genders, at all age groups, in each grade, no matter if we are talking about primary or secondary school.

Table 2. Representation of students' views on experiencing school violence

Have I ever been a victim of violence?	NEVER		RARELY		OCCASIONALLY		OFTEN	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
PRIMARY SCHOOL	75	51,7	50	34,5	12	8,3	8	5,5
SECONDARY SCHOOL	100	55,9	59	33	14	7,8	6	3,3
TOTAL	175	54,9	109	33,6	26	8	14	4,3

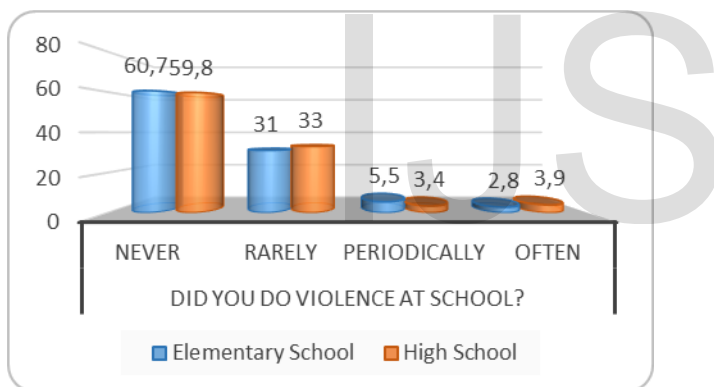
In the end, we wanted to determine how many of the respondents inflicted violence upon others at school, to which 39.3% of primary school students reported that they rarely, occasionally, or often inflict violence upon others at school. The situation is similar in secondary schools, where students say that 40.2% of them have committed violence at school.

4. CONCLUSION

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test

	MannWhitney U	Z	P
Gender	11799,5	-1,810	0,070
Age	11465	-0,659	0,286
Grade	2800,5	-0,384	0,701
Type of school	12845,4	-0,182	0,856

Value obtained through the Mann-Whitney U test for gender equals MW=11799.5 at the significance level of P=0.070, for age this number is MW=11465 at the significance level of P=0.286, for grade MW=2800.5 at the significance level of P=0.701 and for the type of school MW =12845.5 at the significance level of P=0.856. The results show that there is no statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers. The analysis of descriptive data for this variable showed that male students were far more likely to respond that they have committed violence at school than female students, whether it was rare, occasional, or frequent peer violence against other children.



Graph 3. Representation of students' views on acts of school violence

Table 3. Representation of students' views on acts of school violence

Have I ever inflicted violence upon my peers at school?	NEVER		RARELY		OCCASIONALLY		OFTEN
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f
PRIMARY SCHOOL	88	60,7	45	31	8	5,5	4
SECONDARY SCHOOL	107	59,8	59	33	6	3,4	7
TOTAL	195	60,2	104	32,1	14	4,3	11

Peer violence is a complex problem moderated by a number of factors that generate it from the educational characteristics of the family, individual, social and cultural characteristics stemming from the social background and school as an educational institution where children spend much of their time. Peer violence is all the more complex because it is, as an aggression toward an individual caused by others, a predictor of not only short-term, but also long-lasting problems with negative effects on health. The research, which did not include older secondary school students, has confirmed that peer violence among primary and secondary school students is present and that both genders were exposed to it. Although 49.1% of students said, between the two genders, that boys are more prone to violence, the 34.3% students who stated that both genders are equally prone to violence should not be neglected. The analysis of individual answers showed that female students preferred the answer that boys are the ones who are more likely to inflict violence, while boys emphasized that the violence is most prevalent among them. Primary school students responded with 48.8% that they were rarely, occasionally or often victims of peer violence, while 44.13% of secondary school students responded that they were a victim of peer violence. These devastating results support recent worldwide research that confirms that peer violence is present all around the world. In Scandinavian countries, according to research, 5.6% – 7% of students are perpetrators of violence (Olweus, 1993, as cited in Dedaj, 2012; Olweus, 1998), 8% in primary schools in the USA (Bradshaw et al., 2007, as cited in Dedaj, 2012), and in English primary schools, 12% of the students are perpetrators of peer violence (Whitney and Smith, 1993, as cited by Sutton and Smith, 1999). In Croatia, a survey conducted by Zagreb Child Protection Centre showed that 16% of students behave violently against other students almost daily (Karlović, 2006). Pregrad et al., 2007 claim that there are 12% of perpetrators of violence (those who inflict violence 2-3 times a month) in primary and secondary school population. According to the same research, victims of peer violence in Scandinavian countries constitute 7.6% - 9% (Olweus, 1993, as cited by Dedaj, 2012; Olweus, 1998). Studies conducted in 33 European countries and in Russia, Turkey, Israel and the USA indicate that 13% of students are victims of peer violence (Popadić, 2009). In the USA, 23% of students have been exposed to peer violence (Bradshaw et al., 2007, as cited by Dedaj, 2012) whereas in English primary schools, 27% of students are *sometimes* or *often* exposed to peer violence (Whitney and Smith, 1993, as cited by Sutton and Smith, 1999). Velki and Vrdoljak, (2013) have found that there is almost 31% of students who only talk about experiencing violence. In this research, we were most interested in students' answers to the question which forms of violence are the most common, and the results indicate that the students put psychological-verbal violence in the first place. Violence in the sense of derision, mockery, insulting, name-calling, all with the aim to hurt the individual and cause him or her to feel less worthy compared to other students, is clearly most widespread among the

school population. Such forms of violence do not cause physical pain, but they do result in psychological traumas that can be just as painful and have long-lasting effects. Physical violence is put in the second place and is more resorted to, as was to be expected, by boys who use it primarily to inflict physical pain on others. This research was limited by a small sample, and it is therefore suggested that additional research is conducted on a more representative sample of respondents that would include other factors of the school, from teachers to the pedagogical support service for the purpose of testing their opinion on students' answers in which they point out that peer violence also occurs during classes. Violence mostly occurs during the Physical and Health Education (21.7%), which should not be tolerated and attributed to physical exercising or justified by inadvertent physical contact. It is interesting that peer violence is present during some other classes as well, most notably during the optional class of Religious Studies, while it is least present during Computer Sciences. The results can be interpreted in two ways. Maybe the children find Religious Studies uninteresting, so they resort to some other unpopular activities, or religion teachers are unsuccessful in maintaining a positive classroom environment. The subject matter of Computer Sciences is interesting to the children, children are preoccupied with personal interests and there is no place for violence, or there is, but very little. The research confirmed that 39.3% of primary school students and 40.2% of secondary school students have inflicted violence on other students, primarily boys. Continuing education and prevention programs are suggested to highlight peer violence as a form of inappropriate behaviour. Otherwise, the school sends a message of being an unsafe place, especially if violence occurs during classes.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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