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Peer Violence in the Perspective of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore peer violence as experienced by students with disabilities and understand its relevance to their psychosocial and educational functioning. The research used the individual case method. The narratives of three high school students with disabilities who are victims of peer violence form the basis for research conclusions in the area indicated. The presented experiences of students with disabilities related to experiencing peer violence along with the accompanying long-term consequences show their perspective of functioning both at school and beyond, in which traumatic experiences, loss of a sense of security, helplessness, and lack of effective help and loss of hope of receiving it come to the fore. Disability and the related potential weakness and reaction to otherness, being different are perceived as the main cause of hostile peer behavior. The presented research results justify the need for broad involvement of all participants in the educational process (including mainly school principals, teachers, students, parents and specialists) in creating an inclusive environment, free of peer violence, open to the diversity of students, promoting respect and empathy towards other people, regardless of on their individual characteristics or skills.

Key words: peer violence, bullying, students with disabilities.

Introduction

Inclusive education, whose mission is to prepare the young generation for accepting differences among individuals, fostering dialogue and cooperation, is instrumental in building a society open to diversity, one that is friendly and understanding. It aims to create a platform for establishing peer relationships based on mutual respect, tolerance for differences, recognition of equal rights, and opposition to all manifestations of discrimination. Peer violence experienced by students with disabilities from non-disabled peers is a particularly undesirable phenomenon that must be identified and eliminated as a priority. Research indicates that the public school environment, in addition to the undeniable benefits of arising from the inclusive education of students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers, also poses risks related to the occurrence of peer violence against students with disabilities (Plichta, Olempska-Wysocka 2013; Rose et al. 2009; Rose et al. [2010]).

Any behavior aimed at causing physical or psychological harm to an individual is considered aggression (Aronson 2009, p. 250). Violence is characterized by mental or physical power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. A specific form of school violence is bullying, defined as a repeated hostile, intentional negative actions of the perpetrator(s) against a victim who is unable to defend for any given reason (Olweus 2007, p. 21). The World Health Organization's definition of violence encompasses not only physical or psychological force, but also the abuse of power, resulting in actual or potential harm to a person's health, survival, development, or dignity, thus covering such harmful actions as discrimination, isolation, exclusion, neglect and abuse (Krug et al. 2002, p. 17).

The most common forms of hostile actions between peers identified in the literature include physical violence (infringing upon another person's integrity or property, or engaging in actions that pose such risks), verbal violence (uttering negative messages that undermine the dignity of the victim) and relational violence (group exclusion, isolation) (Berger [2007]). Studies suggest that victims perceive relational violence more acutely than physical aggression directed at them. It contributes to alienating students from their peer group and is difficult to diagnose (Slonje, Smith [2008]).

Research findings indicate that students with disabilities attending public schools are more frequently subjected to various types of violence and aggression in the form of physical aggression or threats thereof, compared to their non-disabled peers. The "disability effect" has a significant impact on the prevalence of this phenomenon. Certain disability characteristics can be considered risk factors victimization, including intellectual limitations, impaired communication, motor limitations, isolation hindering withdrawal from or avoidance of abusive situa-

tions, a heightened need of acceptance, and difficult, atypical behaviors (Plichta, Olempska-Wysocka 2013, p. 206). People with disabilities are even referred to as “easy victims” due to the reduced likelihood of revealing the identity of the perpetrator and tendency to treat such victims or witnesses as unreliable (Gudjonsson [2021]; Milne, Bull [2001]).

Experiencing victimization, particularly systematic peer aggression during adolescence or preadolescence, leads to severe negative consequences, i.a., for mental health and overall well-being (Rigby, p. 583; Due et al., p. 130). Among the most significant consequences of bullying experienced by its victims, confirmed by numerous studies, are depression, social anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and psychosomatic disorders (Due et al., p. 131).

The issue of peer violence against students with disabilities is all the more significant because it affects the entire school community. Bullying usually takes place in front of witnesses, with other students in the class being aware of who is bullying whom, and in most instances, being direct observers of such behavior (TłuściakDeliowska 2013, p. 83). Unfortunately, research indicates that students typically do not stand up for classmates with disabilities falling victim to acts of violent in the school environment (Mikrut 2004, p. 264; Buchmat 2021, p. 519).

Purpose and Method of Research

The aim of the study was to explore peer violence as experienced by students with disabilities and understand its relevance to their psychosocial and educational functioning. Answers were sought to the following research questions: 1) How do students with disabilities describe their own experiences with peer violence, what aspects of those experiences do they pay particular attention to? 2) What consequences in relation to experiencing peer violence are revealed in their narratives? 3) How do the surveyed students describe and interpret the reactions of the school environment to peer violence against them?

A qualitative research strategy using the individual case method was adopted. A semi-structured interview scenario consisting of three parts was used to gather research data. The first part of the interview — basic information — is introductory, contains information about the purpose, the research method, sensitive data confidentiality clause, as well as a request for the interviewee’s consent to record the interview and to use excerpts of the transcript in the research paper. The second part — the substantive part — consists of questions focused, adequately to the research problems posed, around three thematic areas. This part of the interview has “an open-ended format, allowing for the possibility of changing the thematic blocks or order of questions, which makes it possible to follow specific themes emerging in the respondents’ statements” (Kvale 2010, p. 100). The interview ends with a concluding question, in which the interviewees are asked to

enter their statement according to their own intention. The research was carried out with the consent of the parents of the students surveyed.

Interviews were conducted with three 16–17-year-olds with a certified mild disability (Katarzyna, Paweł – visual impairment, Bartek – intellectual impairment). They were second-year students of a general secondary school who had experienced violence from non-disabled school peers at an earlier educational stage. In the analysis of the survey results, people's names have been changed to protect personal information.

Study Results

Experiences of Peer Violence by Students with Disabilities

An analysis of the statements of the surveyed students with disabilities indicate that they have experienced long-term violence from peers. The phenomenon gradually increased, changing the forms and scope of violence. Initially, it took the form of relational violence involving deliberate, intentional stigmatization and isolation.

Katarzyna describes her experience as follows:

Sometimes in class my classmates laughed at me and pushed me around, often called me an 'alien' and didn't want to play with me. During breaks when I wanted to talk to someone and approached someone, they would run away from me (Katarzyna).

The student clearly details an initial period characterized by perceived relational violence. She also points to the presence of negative stigma as a factor that coincides with students isolating themselves and making her an object of collective ridicule and repulsion. She also recognizes the leadership nature of peer group interactions on the part of a particular female classmate. Catherine credits her with generating negative attitudes in other peers. The particular driving force behind the said classmate influencing the group's behavior was her popularity and the high sociometric position she occupied in the informal structure of the class.

But once it was like this, only I don't know if it's so bad, but in school there was a division into teams, no one wanted to pick me. There was this Ania in our class. Everyone liked and listened to her, and she was mean to me, telling others to pester me (Katarzyna).

In the longer term, physical violence also began to occur.

Once, when I returned from holidays with my parents, I had a colorful braid attached. As we were changing in the locker room, Ania started pulling my hair and snatched it

away. After that, I didn't go to school because I was afraid of her. I asked my parents to transfer me to a different school (Katarzyna).

Characterizing violent behaviors against the surveyed student with disabilities, the following features can be identified: stigmatizing, escalation of relational violence, presence of the perpetrator's leadership role in expanding the circle of participants in violent behaviors, escalation of forms of violence: from relational violence through psychological harassment to acts of physical violence.

In Piotr's case, the first manifestations of hostility came from a peer group which was not that close, namely students from an older class.

The guys in my class are cool, but those from other classes used to taunt me, call me names, but I had my classmates so I didn't worry about it (Piotr).

Every day, positive relationships in the immediate environment of the class meant that situations experienced by the student with a disability were perceived as insignificant. They were a protective factor against the negative psychological consequences of violent acts. However, it turns out that in this case, too, peer violence was on the rise, moving toward physical violence.

Later they waited for me behind the school as I was walking home, and pushed me and kicked me. Łukasz was from an older class, he was the one who locked me in the bathroom at school, threatening that if I didn't do as he said and if I told anyone about it, he would beat me up. His friends stood on the lookout and watched to see if anyone was coming. He told me to do something and he was recording me. (...) He was putting videos of me on the Internet, but I didn't know about it. A classmate showed it to a teacher at school. Mom was angry when she saw it, went to school and yelled (Piotr).

Perhaps it was the ineffectiveness of psychological harassment that prompted perpetrators to expand the scope of physical violence: hitting, pushing, kicking, forcing them to perform certain actions, making threats and eventually recording acts of violence. In this case, too, one can see the leader of the collective acts of violence and the helpers carrying out his ideas and ways of tormenting a schoolmate with a disability.

Another feature of peer violence that should be noted is that it is transferred into non-school situations. The perpetrators' sense of impunity (lack of appropriate responses to their violent behavior at school), further reinforced by the absence of adult supervisors in the out-of-school environment, caused their violent behavior against the student to escalate, taking on increasingly severe forms. Failure to *respond to violence* is a signal to the perpetrator that he can act with impunity.

A similar state of affairs was found in the case of another student – Bartek. His narrative also clearly echoes the problem of the escalation of violent acts used against him.

It was maybe how they laughed at me and they were so mean for me, sometimes it made me sad, but okay. Sometimes, and I don't know if it's that, but sometimes they would be throwing my backpack. And well, there's this, once I was at a friend's house and they locked me out on the balcony and it was cold. I don't know what I did, but later they let me in. And I didn't know from why, but they were laughing at me. It was like that, and I actually laughed too, but then it got really cold, and I wanted to go inside, but I couldn't (Bartek).

All students surveyed point out that the violence used against them was collective in nature. It was the group they were in that acted against them, they were alone and helpless in it, and so to speak, they accepted the fact of being a victim of violence. Ultimately, they attributed the blame for the existing situation to themselves, due to their possessed (and emphasized by others) otherness, weakness and inability to cope with the hostile behavior of their stronger peers.

I don't know, I've never done anything to them, maybe I'm not like them, I can't do everything the way they do it, and I know I look weird (Katarzyna).

I don't know. I wear glasses, they laughed at me and called me blindy (Piotr).

I think because someone once told me, but I don't remember, but someone at school told me I was a freak. My mother told me I'm special and I'm not supposed to care, so I don't care (Bartek).

Although it is difficult to unequivocally attribute the triggering effect of peer violence to disability, statements from students who are victims of peer violence indicate that their otherness, difference and potential weakness is perceived by them as the main cause of hostile behavior by their peers. A fundamental trigger and provocative factor for their increasing harassment by other students is their disability-related otherness.

Reactions of Students with Disabilities to Experienced Peer Violence

An analysis of statements made by surveyed students with disabilities regarding their reactions to experiencing peer violence indicates that they suffer serious psychological consequences. Above all, they fear both the behavior of their peers and seeking help so as not to further expose themselves to perpetrators of violence.

I was afraid to speak up so that others at school wouldn't torment me more (Katarzyna).

Eventually, the surveyed student experienced the accumulated negative emotions alone, and her life became filled with sadness, frequent crying and reliving traumatizing events. She felt a sense of trauma and helplessness.

I feel bad, I often cry. My grandmother always tells me not to cry, because I sometimes cry when I'm with her, because my grandmother lives with us (Katarzyna).

Among the described behaviors to the experienced violence in the students' narratives, more violent reactions are also revealed.

When others laugh, insult me, I get very angry, I get hot, I scream, when I feel bad. And then my heart beats so fast, I don't like it when it happens (Piotr).

I was angry, it upset me. I didn't cry, because they would keep on laughing. I shouted at Marcin and felt better afterwards (Bartek).

Screaming as a reaction to vent negative emotions can be interpreted by others as irrational behavior, disruptive to others, and consequently further exacerbate the negative attitude of those around and distrust of the student with a disability. Directed at other people, it becomes a manifestation of a response that is also aggressive, providing relief, but leading to a build-up of aggression in the victim.

Another form of relieving the stress of experiencing peer violence is to escape into virtual reality. Such is the case with Bartek, according to whom the world of virtual games is more friendly, allowing him to forget, if only for a short time, about the feelings of sadness and helplessness.

I like to play games, I often play after school. When I was feeling bad, I could play a little longer, but my parents make sure I don't play too much. There you can jump, run, and it's so cool and colorful (Bartek).

Statements from students with disabilities indicate that they are attempting to cope on their own with the ever-present emotions related to experiencing violence from peers. They would like to forget unpleasant experiences and be able not to return to them again, as evidenced by one statement:

I don't know. I don't think about it anymore now, because... I don't see them anymore (Piotr).

However, it seems that they ultimately remain lonely and beaten down by their natural *joie de vivre* and self-esteem.

The consequences of the violence experienced are also evident in the educational activities of the students surveyed. In particular, they experience fear of speaking up in class or fear of negative peer judgement.

I am ashamed. I get nervous, I don't like to speak at the blackboard (Piotr).

I don't like going to the blackboard because they think I'm stupid (Bartek).

Students also pointed to lowered school grades, failure to understand the content of the material covered, absenteeism, difficulty concentrating, and lack of self-confidence.

The presented experiences of students with disabilities related to being victims of peer violence, along with the accompanying long-term consequences, reveal their perspective of functioning at school and beyond, in which traumatic experiences, loss of a sense of security, helplessness and lack of hope for obtaining effective help come to the fore.

Reactions of the School Environment to Peer Violence from the Perspective of Students with Disabilities

An analysis of the phenomenon of violence experienced by the students surveyed shows that the violence used against them involved actions that lasted for a long period of school education, and the range of forms of violence used expanded and became increasingly drastic. An important element highlighted by the students is the fact that a group of peers turned against them, among whom leaders played an important role, gathering around them willingly compliant oppressors. None of those surveyed had a reaction from the other students to the harm being done to them. Therefore, it can be concluded that there was peer acquiescence to the violent behavior used and a general acceptance of the prevailing situation, in which it is a group of stronger students who attack a weaker colleague. In Katarzyna's perception, none of her classmates behaved properly toward her.

No one treated me normally, they either laughed at me and called me names, or avoided me (Katarzyna).

The students' narratives suggest that the teachers' assistance was not very effective. Bartek does not remember getting any help at school. According to Piotr, who was bullied by students from another class, the teacher showed interest in him, encouraged him to report any incidents, providing daily support and a sense of security.

My form teacher is nice, she always asked if something was wrong with me, she said I could tell her if something was wrong" (Piotr).

However, the boy could not assess whether the help he received from the teachers had any positive results. The fact that Piotr's parents have taken sup-

portive measures outside of school (help from a psychologist) suggests that they also believe that the school has supported their son in dealing with the difficult situation taking place in the school environment was insufficient.

I went to a psychologist with my mother. She asked me a lot of questions, talked a lot, but it wasn't at school. I went there twice a month after school and we talked a lot about what I thought about what the boys were doing to me, how I felt. At first, I didn't want to go, but later I thought it was cool (Piotr).

Meetings with a psychologist were a very important form of help for the boy, who, after experiencing violence, had problems with self-esteem, expressing his emotions and opinions, and communicating with others. It should be noted that the appropriate response of the boy's parents contributed to improving his mental state and tackling the difficult matter of the experienced peer violence.

In Katarzyna's case, the actions taken by the teacher and school counselor were ad hoc interventions whenever incidents were reported by the student or noticed by a teacher.

Once when I reported it, the teacher called me and the person who pushed me in. She told her to apologize to me, but I don't remember if there was anything else. These people often threatened me that if I said anything to the teacher, they would beat me up. Later, a new teacher came to the school. Once at recess, she saw the kids picking on me, and during one of the lessons she came to our classroom and we talked the entire lesson. [Another time] The school counselor called Kacper's parents in because he threw my backpack in the trash and she saw it (Katarzyna).

According to the student, parents were informed of situations in which undesirable incidents occurred, after which they and the teacher discussed the problem.

If someone does something wrong, our teacher would call their parents in and later we would talk with her and mom or dad (Katarzyna).

Each of the students surveyed recognized and valued the emotional support experienced from those closest to them (parents, grandmother, siblings, a friend). Above all, parents were the ones who helped them regain their mental balance, self-esteem and sense of security.

My mom always says that if something happens, I should tell her, because she's always there for me. And if I cry, my mom hugs me, and then we do something fun together. We like to go for walks with our dog and go cycling (Katarzyna).

Bartek values most the support he receives from his sister.

Kasia always said that when I was sad, I should come to her. Kasia is sister and my best friend (Bartek)

According to Piotr, the only place where he feels safe is his family.

The place I feel safe is at home (Piotr).

However, it seems that in the case of the surveyed people with disabilities, neither teachers nor parents have been able to effectively solve their problem of ongoing peer violence. Consequently, they have only deepened the students' belief that nothing can change their situation. Katarzyna has completely given up seeking help from them.

Parents talked to our form teacher, but it didn't help. Then I stopped telling my parents and teachers, because it didn't change anything (Katarzyna).

Completion of elementary school education and the associated change of school and peer environment ended the difficult period of the surveyed students' experiences of being a victim of peer violence. Although each of them feels safe in their current school, the past years have transformed their natural daily life into a life of loneliness, exclusion and rejection, depriving them of the joy of being among their peers.

Although Katarzyna has found a new friend, she is happy that no one pays attention to her. For her, interest from others has negative connotations and she associates it with a sense of inferiority.

It's better now, no one picks on me, I have a different class and a friend – Asia. At least now no one pays attention to me, I don't feel inferior anymore (Katarzyna).

It should be noted that despite the change in the peer environment, she still feels threatened:

I really like being at home, it's where I feel safe (Katarzyna).

Peter tries to suppress past events in his memory: *"I don't think about it anymore now, because I don't see them"* (Piotr). He also indicates that he feels safe only at home. Bartek, on the other hand, finds apparent joy in the world of computer games. In this way, he reduces his stress, anxiety and tension, but at the same time, by escaping into virtual reality, he becomes more vulnerable in real life.

It should be noted that the surveyed students with disabilities with experiences of peer violence were simultaneously subject to long-term social exclusion, developing a sense of inferiority. Despite the change in environment, they continue to feel that their sense of security is threatened, they withdraw from peer contacts, and maintain social distance, moving toward self-exclusion.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The picture that emerges from the analysis corresponds with the results of numerous empirical reports on the phenomenon of peer violence, including that against children and adolescents with disabilities.

Analysis of the statements of the surveyed adolescents indicates that the phenomenon of peer violence against students with disabilities should be considered holistically, from the perspective of a combination of often interrelated individual and social factors. The social context in which violence occurs and the fact that disability is a factor that can increase the risk of becoming a victim of violence are of particular importance.

Students with different types of disabilities (as exemplified in the surveyed students), particularly children and adolescents with behavioral disorders (Kumpulainen, Räsänen, Puura 2001), intellectual disabilities (Buchnat 2021; Pyżalski, Plichá 2016), are exposed to the risk of peer violence. Analysis of the collected empirical material indicates that the students surveyed were victims of bullying, i.e., a form of aggression “that is intentional, repetitive, sustained over extended periods of time, and in which there is a significant disproportion between the perpetrators and the victims, who are unable to defend themselves effectively” (Plichá, Olempska-Wysocka 2013, p. 171). They experienced physical violence (being pushed, kicked, having their hair pulled, possessions destroyed, being locked out on the balcony and in the restroom) and psychological violence (name-calling — “blindy”, “freak”, being ridiculed, teased) not only from classmates, but also from other students at school. Violent acts occurred on school grounds, as well as outside the school (during leisure time), in the vicinity of the victims’ place of residence, such as in the yard, sports field or playground.

The study confirmed empirical reports (Plichá, Olempska-Wysocka 2013, 2014; Pyżalski, Plichá 2016) that the reasons for this state of affairs can be varied, and should be sought both in the victim and the perpetrator, witnesses of the acts of violence and school personnel. Students with disabilities usually differ from their peers in terms of social competence, physical, intellectual or emotional abilities. This difference is often used by aggressors to ridicule, intimidate or discriminate them. Students who have difficulties with peer relationships, making friends, having few friends or even experiencing social exclusion are also more likely to suffer from school aggression and violence. Some researchers confirm that the strongest factor in victimization is the lack of friends (Hodyes, Perry, 1999), while the most important protective factor is peer support (Rose et al., 2015). Experiencing discrimination, lack of acceptance and peer support by people with disabilities negatively affects their self-esteem and self-worth. “A negative self-image can cause anxiety and various maladaptive symptoms. The

drive to strengthen self-esteem takes the form of the need for social acceptance, recognition by the group. Failure to satisfy this need can lead to reduced resilience in an emergency situation” (Hare 2011, p. 249).

In the narratives of the surveyed students, it resonates clearly that the consequences of peer violence are usually long-lasting and negatively affect their overall well-being, self-esteem, self-worth and interpersonal relations. In addition to experiencing psychosomatic (stomach aches, headaches, etc.), emotional (including feelings of shame, sadness, helplessness) and social (tendency to isolation, fear of speaking out in class, etc.) problems with schooling (problems with concentration, decreased motivation to study, reluctance to go to school, etc.) are also revealed.

Violence “feeds” on silence – it often remains hidden and unrecognized due to the victims and witnesses remaining silent. Studies have shown that students with disabilities who experience peer violence usually do not dare to report the incidents or speak openly about them. There is a number of reasons why they remain silent, such as fear of the perpetrator’s reaction, shame, a sense of powerlessness, fear of rejection or ridicule by peers. Some of them do not understand the mechanism they are a part of, or minimize the effects of violence in an attempt to adapt to a difficult situation. According to the study, they are unable to cope with difficult situations, react to aggression from peers with strong emotions (usually crying, sometimes anger) and withdrawal. The fact that they rarely turn to teachers for help is definitely tells a lot, as it may indicate their low sense of security at school, their belief in the ineffectiveness of interventions by teachers and the school counselor/psychologist when violent acts are reported. Also, witnesses generally do not inform adults (e.g., teachers) about violent behavior against schoolmates/classmates. According to the accounts of the students surveyed, they most often take the position of uninvolved observers/outsideers – “...neither they help the perpetrator, nor do they support the victim, they choose the path of passivity and indifference” (Wegrzynowska 2021, p. 26). Their passivity is often related to fear of being labeled a whistleblower or squealer, retaliation by the perpetrator of the violence, or, when the aggressor is a very popular student (as noted in the study), a desire to get on their good side. It also happens that many students are unable to properly assess the situation, do not know how they should behave and whom to inform in situations of violence. Barbara Coloroso (2004) rightly notes that a lack of ability to respond can result in “apathy” on the part of witnesses and indifference to violence, and an aura of indifference can foster the spread of contempt for the bullied child. Research has confirmed that the passive attitude of school peers toward aggression is not only acquiescence to the perpetrator’s antisocial actions, without suffering the consequences, but also confirms the victim of violence in the belief that she is to blame, “...evidence that it is she and her traits that cause her to be chosen from the group by the perpetrator” (Fenik [2013], p. 9). The indifference and lack of helpful responses on the part of witnesses makes them, too, “a victim of the violent situation, someone without a voice” (Fenik [2013], p. 8).

Analysis of the collected material indicates that when facing peer violence, students with disabilities primarily seek and receive help from those closest to them (parents, grandmother, siblings, a friend). Mainly it is emotional support in the form of consolation, comforting. Parents are also the ones who most often initiate remedial action to overcome the problem. To this end, they engage in conversations with their children, provide them with assistance from a psychologist, and contact teachers with the hope of effective intervention in the school environment.

It is the teachers who should be vigilant, be the first to spot the problem, react, and teach their charges about violence and ways of defending against it. The example of the students surveyed (which is confirmed by numerous studies) indicates that the reality of education in this area is vastly different from social expectations. The school does not react early enough to the first signs of help, teachers pay too little attention to the social relations of students in the classroom, often failing to notice or downplaying the initial symptoms of peer violence against students with disabilities. The schools attended by the surveyed students with disabilities did not take any preventive and inclusive measures towards them and their peers. Respondents' statements suggest that no diverse methods and forms of work were carried out to help understand, respond to and counter the phenomenon of peer violence against people with disabilities.

The school's role in countering peer violence against students with disabilities is extremely important. It has a duty to provide a safe and supportive environment for all students. Here are some potential measures a school can take to counter peer violence against students with disabilities:

1. Education and awareness: Schools should conduct programs, educational workshops for students to increase their understanding and empathy towards classmates with disabilities.
2. Training for teachers: Teachers should be trained to identify signs of peer violence and to understand the needs of students with disabilities. This helps to effectively counter violence and provide support.
3. Education about violence: The school should organize information campaigns to raise awareness in the school community about the problem of peer violence and the need to support students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should be provided with additional education about peer violence and how they can protect themselves and how/where to seek help.
4. Promoting pro-social attitudes: Schools should promote a culture of equality and inclusion, where all students are treated with respect and participate in school life on an equal basis. This could include, e.g., educational classes on tolerance and diversity, creating school situations that foster inclusion and cooperation among students, implementing programs that promote inclusion, such as the buddy system, in which students without disabilities assist and support their peers with disabilities.

5. Policies and regulations: Schools should have clearly defined policies and procedures for countering peer violence and discrimination. They should take into account the diverse needs of students with disabilities and include specific preventive measures.
6. Action: Peer violence must not be ignored. Teachers and other school staff should actively respond to incidents of violence, talk to students and implement appropriate procedures.
7. Supporting victims of violence: Schools should provide psychological and social support to students experiencing peer violence. These can be done either by specialized consultants or teachers who have access to the right tools and training. It also can be done through the implementation of programs for the development of social skills to help students cope with stress and conflict.
8. Incident monitoring and reporting: Schools should collect data on incidents of peer violence and discrimination and analyze them regularly. This allows to identify problems and implement countermeasures.
9. Involving parents and legal guardians: Cooperation with students' parents is key. Schools should inform parents about incidents of peer violence and work with them to solve the problems.
10. Cooperation with external institutions: The school should cooperate with NGOs, disability specialists and other institutions to obtain support and expertise in countering peer violence.

It is important that all participants in the educational process (including mainly school principals, teachers, students, parents and specialists) are involved in creating an inclusive environment, free of peer violence, open to the diversity of students. The school is tasked not only with providing knowledge, but also with shaping attitudes and values that promote respect and empathy for others, regardless of their individual characteristics or abilities.

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