Milena Košak Babuder, Vesna Bilić, Nika Obed, Tanja Virant and Milena Valenčič Zuljan, *Učenci s posebnimi potrebami in medvrstniško nasilje* [*Special Needs Students and Peer Violence*], Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, 2024; 248 pp.: ISBN: 978-961-253-322-9

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The problem of peer violence is an intriguing and frequent subject of scientific research and study, but the problem of violence among special needs children is rather neglected in this respect. In the literature, the problems of special needs children are often identified as risk factors regarding peer victimisation. Their negative experiences reflect in turn on their primary difficulties and school success, making them, in a sense, doubly at risk. Due to their vulnerability and lack of developed resources to successfully cope with traumatic experiences, this group of children deserves special attention and protection; there is a need to sensitise both the public and professionals towards their problems. We believe that the book *Učenci s posebnimi potrebami in medvrstniško nasilje* (Special Needs Students and Peer Violence) contributes significantly to successfully dealing with these problems, as the problems that special needs children face in their relationships with peers are explicitly defined and supported by scientific evidence, which is fundamentally important when it comes to prevention and intervention in schools.

The monograph is structured in two broad thematic units that include theoretical discussion and present the results of the empirical research conducted. The first part provides general definitions and outlines the conceptualisation and description of types of violence at schools (violence of parents towards teachers, violence among teachers, etc.). Attention is then directed towards peer violence and its forms, characteristics, risk factors and consequences. A

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very important section refers to addressing peer violence on the level of the education system and schools, and to the role of teachers dealing with the problem of peer violence.

Violence against special needs children is discussed in a separate section. The introduction highlights how often certain groups of special needs children are exposed to violence (children with pronunciation difficulties and language disorder or autistic spectrum disorder; hearing or sight impaired children; children with intellectual and learning difficulties or ADHD; children with chronic diseases). Prevalence data about the exposure of special needs children to various classic forms of violence (physical, verbal, relational and sexual) and electronic violence are analysed, and it is determined that these groups are more often exposed to peer violence in their schools than their peers without special needs. Although children with special needs are most often the victims of peer violence, the authors of the monograph suggest, based on the relevant literature, that they are in fact sometimes the perpetrators, and that they are even more frequently found in the role of perpetrator-victim. The results of the research reveal the severity of the problem, and the focus is therefore on the potential risk factors (familiar, school and social), especially the individual factors (the children's visible outer and behavioural features, social skills deficits, few or no friends, and lack of peer support) that often lead to victimisation.

The prevalence data give the impression that cruelty is part of the everyday life of special needs children, which is why reducing peer violence is a priority in schools, with the teacher's role being especially important in this respect. Consequently, there is a separate chapter on the competence of teachers to cope with peer violence, i.e., various factors are analysed that predict how successful teachers cope with peer violence among children. The chapter includes discussion of teachers' professional qualities and their ability to act, and offers insight into the acquired skills that teachers need to successfully solve the problems of peer violence in both the real and virtual worlds.

After the theoretical part, the next two chapters present the results of qualitative and quantitative research, which represents the added value of this book and its special contribution.

The main goal of the quantitative research was to analyse the experiences of teachers and special and rehabilitation pedagogues in primary schools in Slovenia regarding their recognition of and reactions to peer violence, especially when it is directed towards special needs students, in order to gain an insight into their assessed level of competence.

The results show that most of the research participants had encountered peer violence (82%), and 61.1% had intervened actively, i.e., they had reacted to

witnessed violence, stopped it and similar. The research established that perception of the severity of the violence is influenced more by its form than by the student's status (whether he/she is a special needs child or not) or the professional orientation of the participating professional (rehabilitation pedagogue or teacher). When it comes to the forms of peer violence, relational violence is perceived as the least serious, as confirmed by other research, and the participants are less likely to intervene in cases of relational violence. Interestingly, the research participants assessed electronic violence as the most serious form. Furthermore, the research results suggest that teachers' reactions are influenced to a high degree by their perception of the seriousness of the peer violence incident. The research participants typically use active strategies when dealing with direct forms of peer violence (physical, verbal), including individual or group conversations with students or informing the school administration, whereas they mostly ignore cases of indirect violence, especially relational violence. Furthermore, it was established for all of the participants that they are more likely to react in cases of violent behaviour involving special needs students, who objectively need more help and support.

With regard to perception of competence, there were no differences between the research participants regarding gender, age, occupation or personal involvement in violent incidents during their education. They estimate that they are most competent when it comes to recognising students' roles in different forms of violence, and least competent when it comes to electronic violence, which is the domain in which they also feel least efficient. Discussing these results, the authors claim that it is expected that participants feel less competent and efficient in cases of electronic violence, as this is a new form of violence that, due to advancing technology, has various modalities and requires additional knowledge and new methodological approaches.

The participants acquire competences for recognising and reacting to peer violence through solving specific cases of peer violence in cooperation with professionals and colleagues from other schools; only very rarely do they attribute these competences to their university education. Discussing the results, the authors point out that peer violence content is not an obligatory part of programmes intended to prepare future teachers for their everyday confrontation with unpleasant situations among peers and for implementing preventive activities.

The way teachers and other education professionals cope with peer violence is determined by their opinions and beliefs. The research participants mostly agreed with the statement that peer violence can be prevented by persistent pedagogical work in class and school, which additionally confirms that

they are well aware of the important role they play. The participants mostly disagreed with the statement that violence among students does not affect their school success, which implies knowledge about the possible consequences of this form of violence. The authors postulate negative consequences of different beliefs and opinions, which is why students receive significantly less help from adults.

As expected, the research participants mostly strongly and expressly sympathise with students who are involved in cases of peer violence. The least empathy was expressed in cases of relational violence and the most empathy in cases of electronical violence. Only the most relevant results of this complex and important research are presented here.

In their effort to gain a more complete and deeper insight into the experiences of special needs children regarding their involvement in peer violence, and to acquire valuable information in this regard, the authors also conducted qualitative research. As the authors themselves explain, the qualitative method was chosen because some children – such as those with writing, reading or comprehension difficulties, or problems understanding complex social situations and similar – find it difficult to participate in quantitative research. Furthermore, this research approach was considered especially suitable for understanding meaning and interpreting subjective, often unpleasant experiences of vulnerable groups due to its fluidity and flexibility. The authors also included children's parents in the research, as their goal was to analyse the problem from different perspectives. All of the participants were from Croatia.

It was established that special needs children are exposed to all of the forms of peer violence mentioned in the introductory part. They often experience not only physical violence from their peers, but are subject to verbal violence almost every day as well. However, the most frequent and apparently painful form is relational violence that includes direct (caricaturing behaviour and making fun of somebody's flaws) and indirect (ignoring and isolating) forms of violence aimed at making other children laugh at the victim, develop negative attitudes towards them or even hurt or deconcentrate them. Although it is rarely mentioned, the research results show that special needs children and teenagers are exposed to sexual violence from their peers as well. In this regard, they described their painful experiences, e.g., touching of their intimate parts, being ridiculed when they cannot defend themselves or escape since they are in a wheelchair. Stealing passwords, identity theft and social network misuse are more common in special needs groups, which the victims themselves attribute to their low computer literacy and their inability to protect themselves and recognise bad intentions, as well as their need to connect with their peers who ask

various favours of them (sharing passwords and similar). Even though parents know that their children are exposed to peer violence, they are not aware of the fact that they experience sexual and electronic violence as well. The research participants themselves state that they are not only victims of peer violence, but that some of them behave violently and in an unfriendly way towards their peers, provoking, teasing or irritating them, which causes a violent response that they in turn react to violently, thus placing themselves in the perpetrator-victim group.

Although special needs children have a strong desire to make friends with their peers, they have considerable problems achieving this. For some of them, it is mostly the lack of interactions and mutual understanding, caused by their primary difficulty, that creates distance between them and their peers, resulting in their feeling hurt and rejected. If they succeed in befriending their peers, this protects them from peer violence. In conclusion, the authors emphasise the necessity to teach this group of children how to build friendship with their peers, which could have a positive influence on their sense of satisfaction and success.

Special needs children and teenagers describe their reactions to violent situations as '*bitter experiences*' accompanied with feelings of '*deep hurt and injustice*' that are hard to forget, stating that they have had '*nightmares*' due to these experiences and have even acted in a self-destructive way sometimes. After violent experiences, parents notice that their children feel sad and afraid, and they themselves feel very angry. The research results imply that both children and their parents are dissatisfied with the support they receive in society and in educational institutions when it comes to special needs children.

On the theoretical and cognitive level, the importance of this monograph lies in the systematisation of the quantitative research results about the incidence of peer violence among special needs children, and the analysis of the forms of violence depending on the type of difficulty. The combination of theoretical and empirical research provides an insight into how much special needs children suffer in interactions with their peers, thus expanding our knowledge of their inner emotions and experiences caused by their peers' violent behaviour. It is therefore the concept of this book that provides a deeper, more complete and comprehensive depiction of special needs children and their experiences with the phenomenon of peer violence.

In conclusion, the authors state that children who are different (whether in their appearance, behaviour or speech, etc.) and who have communicative difficulties and underdeveloped social skills mostly find it difficult to be accepted by other children and are more likely to be misunderstood, stigmatised and

victimised. The peers of these children view their characteristics as weaknesses, and their sensitivity and vulnerability is often a trigger for violent behaviour. The victimisation they experience influences their confidence in a negative way, resulting in increased anxiety and withdrawal from social interactions in order to protect themselves from more unpleasant experiences. All of this has a negative effect on their emotional and social life and amplifies their primary difficulties. Such experiences are perceived as extremely painful by both the children and their parents, who believe that these problems are far too rarely spoken about and even more rarely dealt with appropriately in educational institutions. The authors emphasise the role and competence of teachers who recognise negative interactions early and do not allow those behavioural patterns to become common among their students. It is therefore important to train teachers to develop constructive strategies of creating and maintaining positive and friendly relationships between peers, but also to develop their assertive skills and encourage proactive coping with unpleasant experiences. In order for teachers to be able to respond to children's needs adequately and protect them from violence, it is necessary to invest in training, additional educational programmes and professional development.

The present monograph is intended for students of teacher education faculties, teacher practitioners and all those who analyse and research educational practices in order to better understand special needs children in their interaction with their peers. It will also be useful for creators of education policies, enabling them to proactively create the preconditions for implementing quality programmes in which the subject of preventing peer violence against special needs children is considered indispensable.