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PEER VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL SAFETY – REFLECTION ON THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA

Abstract

Peer violence and school safety have always been relevant topics in society. After the tragedy that occurred at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School in Belgrade, these issues have gained special significance and received great public attention. The loss of innocent children’s lives has prompted a reassessment of past practices in schools regarding school safety. The aim of this paper is to analyze problems related to peer violence in the Republic of Srpska. Subsequently, the authors address the issue of school safety in a broader context and, finally, discuss the justification for educating students in the field of security culture in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Srpska.

Keywords: *Peer violence, school safety, security culture, Republic of Srpska.*

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Introduction

Mass school shootings are a frequent phenomenon in the United States (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018; Madfis, 2020). In the majority of cases, the perpetrators are current or former students of those schools (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Mass shootings in educational institutions are not unique to the U.S. Such events, although much rarer, also occur in other countries, such as the Russian Federation or Canada (Peshkovskaya et al., 2021; Stetsenko et al., Howells, 2012). In the region of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), mass killings occur, but not frequently. It is concerning that four mass killings occurred within just one year.³

The mass shooting that occurred on May 3, 2023, at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School in Belgrade left the entire region in disbelief. A thirteen-year-old student of the school fatally shot a security guard, nine students, and injured five students and a school teacher with gunfire (RTS, 2023). The tragedy at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School (hereinafter “Ribnikar”) in Belgrade is the first mass killing in a school institution, not only in Serbia but also in the Western Balkans, and likely much further. Such crimes disturb the public. In the hours and days following the murder, the media constantly reported on the event. Television programs were filled with shows featuring experts from various fields trying to answer questions about how such a crime could have happened, whether it could have been prevented, and what needs to be done in the future to prevent similar tragedies. The tragedy at “Ribnikar” truly has the dimensions of a catastrophe. Lives were extinguished. It is a catastrophe for the entire society and serves as a red alert that circumstances have changed. Events like this have become a reality in our region. In the case

³ In the settlement of Medovina in Cetinje, on August 12, 2022, 34-year-old Cetinjanin Vuk Borilović was killed after fatally shooting ten fellow citizens, including two children (Ostojić & Radulović, 2023). One year after the massacre in Cetinje, in Gradačac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on August 11, 2023, Nermin Sulejmanović killed his former unmarried wife Nizama and live-streamed everything on Instagram. Sulejmanović, in his bloody rampage, killed three people and injured three others (Nezavisne novine, 2023). Just a day after the mass murder in “Ribnikar,” on May 4, 2023, twenty-year-old Uroš Blažić shot and killed eight people and injured fourteen others with an automatic rifle in the villages around Mladenovac and Smederevo (Živanović Popović, 2023). However, this is not the first massacre in the vicinity of Mladenovac. Ten years ago, on April 9, 2013, sixty-year-old Ljubiša Bogdanović first killed his 41-year-old son in their home in the morning, then his mother, and shot his wife in the head. He then proceeded to the homes of neighbors and relatives, killing another 11 people, including a two-year-old child. He also killed the parents of the baby. When the police arrived, he shot himself in the head (N1 Serbia, 2023).

of “Ribnikar,” the key question is how it was possible for an exemplary student from an affluent family to commit such a crime. Crisis events are “laboratories of social life” (Kešetović, Korajlić & Toth, 2013: 6). After crises, everything that the public has not had the opportunity to see becomes visible. Tragedies put society’s institutions and responsible individuals who failed to recognize potentially serious problems and take adequate measures to avoid or mitigate the consequences to the test. The crime in “Ribnikar” serves as a pretext to reassess existing practices and protocols regarding student safety and school safety as a whole.

The aim of this paper is to examine specific issues related to violence and safety in schools in the Republic of Srpska, and to critically reassess existing practices while suggesting possible courses of action. The paper begins with the topic of peer violence as the predominant form of socio-pathological behavior among student populations. Peer violence serves as a generator of destructive behaviors, including self-destruction of victims. Naturally, discussions about school safety imply a reference to peer violence. However, peer violence is just one of many threats facing student populations. Therefore, the second part of the paper addresses the issue of school safety in a broader context. The third part discusses the societal justification for introducing subjects related to security culture into the primary and secondary education system in the Republic of Srpska – as one of the possible institutional responses to school safety.⁴

1. Peer Violence

This part of the paper addresses issues related to the treatment of peer violence. This topic is complex, so the problem of peer violence in the Republic of Srpska and its implications for school safety will be generally examined. The discussion involves clear conceptual definitions of peer violence, insight into trends in the Republic of Srpska in this context, analysis of the academic community’s dedication to this topic, and institutional responses to peer violence.

What is peer violence? In theory, there are numerous definitions of peer violence. In the broadest sense, it refers to any intentional physical or psychological violent behavior directed towards children and young people by their peers. However, this broad definition does not fully explain the concept of peer

⁴ In the Republic of Srpska, it is planned to introduce the optional subject “Humanity and Security” experimentally in the final grades of primary and first grades of secondary schools in 20 elementary and 20 secondary schools from September 1, 2023. The subject is introduced as one of the measures to prevent peer violence, following the mass murders at the Belgrade school “Vladislav Ribnikar” (Katić, 2023).

violence. Regardless of the different definitions by authors, three key elements of the phenomenon of peer violence can be identified (Grmuša, 2022: 11). For an act to be considered peer violence, three key criteria need to be met: 1) it is an act aimed at harming someone, 2) it repeats over a period of time, 3) there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator of violence and the victim (the victim is weaker). These criteria enable us to distinguish in practice between peer violence and violence that does not have the characteristics of peer violence. For example, two boys of similar age and physical constitution get into a fight at school. This is a case of violence, but not of peer violence in the strict sense. Although the participants are peers, the other two criteria are not met. The incident does not repeat over a longer period, and there is no asymmetry in the power relationship between the participants in the incident. Incidents of this kind require an immediate response from the school, and in more serious cases, involvement of social workers and the police.

In practice, a distinction is often not made between such or similar incidents of peer violence. Why then is peer violence given special attention? The social danger of such behaviors is far greater than isolated cases of violence that are more or less characteristic within the student population. Peer violence has a higher potential for conflict. The perpetrator of peer violence aims to inflict pain, whether physical or psychological, on another. They do this over a period, leaving the victim to suffer, and typically hold dominance over the victim. Domination may not only be physical but also in terms of the perpetrator's status within the peer group, which they may use to inflict pain on other peers. For example, this could be due to the better socio-economic status of the perpetrator's parents, who may use their child's "popularity" as a "platform" for bullying those who do not enjoy a "special status" in the peer group.

Peer violence manifests in various ways (Sesar, 2011). It can be physical and is more common among boys than girls. In addition to physical violence, there is emotional (psychological) violence, where the intention is to hurt and demean the person, making them feel less worthy. Emotional (psychological) violence in contemporary social context is often perpetrated through social media (Milošević & Putnik, 2019), reaching a much wider audience than direct contact between the bully and the victim, and limiting the victim's ability to defend themselves. A significant form of peer violence is "social violence," which involves excluding the victim from the group. Social recognition by the group is an ontological need of every individual – it is a universal characteristic of human nature. Typically, but not necessarily, for members of the human species, recognition of status and human dignity (Greek *thymos*, θυμός) is

more important than material status. Isolation, interruption of communication by peers towards children and young people whose personalities are still forming, is extremely harmful to their psyche. Such behaviors are not easily observable and usually do not lead to a reaction from authorities. Moreover, they are often ignored unlike physical violence, which usually attracts attention. Research on mass school shootings in the US suggests that mass shooters were often victims of peer violence in the sense of being excluded from the peer group (Kowalski, 2022). We can assume that the desire for revenge due to unmet thymotic instinct (Greek thymos, θυμός) is a significant factor and often a trigger for carrying out mass school shootings.

Additionally, it is necessary to consider where peer violence can occur. Is it only within the school premises? Peer violence can occur both within the school or on the school playground, as well as on the way from home to school, in dormitories, and in places unrelated to the school. This raises the question of what role the school plays in such circumstances, whether it has jurisdiction or not. Also, who is responsible if the students involved are not from the same school and the peer violence occurs outside of school premises? In any case, peer violence outside of school will directly or indirectly manifest in the school environment. It is essential for protocols to anticipate actions in such cases and not leave them in the so-called gray zone of avoiding responsibility.

The causes of peer violence are complex. They can be sought in the personality of the perpetrator, as well as in the social environment in which the young person socializes. The family and peer group have a particular influence, especially in environments where violence is prevalent. In accordance with the theory of learning (Bandura, 1969), violence is learned, and negative examples observed and then imitated have a significant impact on the individual's future behavior. There are other factors shaping the behavior of young people, such as the IT revolution, which has led to the migration of numerous aspects of social life into cyberspace. The disintegration of traditional social values has led to alienation and, as Erich Fromm notes, "sick personalities" for whom violence or malignant aggression serve as a response to the existential situation they find themselves in. Violence becomes a way to achieve the purpose of existence for individuals who are unable to achieve that purpose in a humane way (Fromm, 1984; Fromm, 1989). In such a social environment, insufficient social care for children and young people is not uncommon. The consequence of such a state in society is a change in the value paradigm – anti-values become not only socially acceptable but also desirable, including violence.

1.1. Peer Violence in the Republic of Srpska

What do we know about the phenomenon of peer violence in the Republic of Srpska? Relevant sources of information are publicly available data from relevant ministries, primarily the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sports, and other state institutions (Republic Pedagogical Institute, Ombudsman for Children, Center for Social Work). In addition to the aforementioned sources of information, there are scientific and professional papers on peer violence, as well as reports from non-governmental organizations. At the end of this spectrum are media reports, which are the least reliable in terms of information but are certainly very useful for obtaining initial information about events that have elements of peer violence. Without intending to assess the work of state institutions and especially the way of keeping records and informing the public about peer violence, a lack of publicly available data in the form of studies, reports, or publications on the official websites of state institutions can be noticed. This primarily concerns data on the extent of peer violence, its geographical distribution, forms of occurrence, etc. Certain information about conducted activities, prevention programs of state institutions regarding peer violence are available on their websites. This certainly does not mean that records are not kept, but it indicates a lack of transparency and insufficient public information. Social care for children is of great importance to every society, including ours. Peer violence is a topic widely discussed in public discourse, so general trends should be publicly available, respecting the protection of minors' personal data. The public should know more about this phenomenon, rather than knowledge being based on individual cases that receive media publicity.

The academic community plays a significant role in researching the phenomenon of peer violence. Scientific papers on this topic are a valuable source of knowledge. For a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of peer violence in the Republic of Srpska, research papers presenting the results of empirical studies are particularly valuable. The Police College in Banja Luka published in 2013 a collection of papers from the international conference "Peer Violence (etiology, phenomenology, ways of overcoming, and comparative experiences)." In that collection, among other things, papers were published containing valuable empirical data on the etiology and phenomenology of peer violence (Šikman, 2013). A review of literature and published papers reveals that after 2013, the topic of peer violence has not significantly been in the sphere of interest of the academic community in Republic of Srpska.⁵

⁵ By searching the Google Scholar database using the keywords "Peer Violence, Republika

The lack of publicly available data on peer violence and the inertia of the academic community to dedicate greater attention to this issue certainly does not mean that there are no initiatives, programs, and projects of practical policy regarding the prevention of peer violence in the Republic of Srpska. We will mention just a few of them. The Ministry of Internal Affairs continuously carries out activities related to the prevention of juvenile delinquency. Documents have been adopted defining rules regarding the handling of peer violence.⁶ There are also activities of the Ombudsman for Children and the Republic Pedagogical Institute of the Republic of Srpska, as well as numerous projects implemented by non-governmental organizations (Šikman, 2022). The NGO sector has played a significant role in relation to programs for preventing peer violence in the Republic of Srpska so far. However, the role of the NGO sector needs to be critically assessed. Implemented projects have limited duration, there is dependence on donor funds, and they are often not sustainable in the long term.

Based on this brief analysis, it can be said that there are no publicly available reports on the extent and characteristics of peer violence in the Republic of Srpska. Without insight into the extent and prevalence of peer violence, strategic planning, resource allocation, and implementation of specific activities are not possible. Numerous activities are present, but there is an evident lack of strategic planning. In the Republic of Srpska, there is no strategic document defining priorities, goals, and the implementation of specific activities within action plans.

2. Making the School Safe

What is a safe school, and what besides peer violence can jeopardize safety in schools? Peer violence is just one of the problems schools face or may encounter, all of which have significant security implications. Security is difficult to define, which is why authors resort to operationalizing the concept in the form of questions (Baldwin, 1997; Terriff et al., 1999; Møller, 2000; Hyde-Price, 2001; Williams, 2008; Lipovac, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, we will use seven questions by David Baldwin (Baldwin, 1997) in the context of school safety.

Srpska," we found only one paper published between 2014 and 2023 (see Macanović & Petrović, 2015).

⁶ The Protocol on Violence, Abuse, and Neglect of Children from 2013. The Protocol on Procedures in Cases of Peer Violence among Children and Youth in the Education System of the Republic of Srpska from 2019.

The first question is security for whom? The answer primarily includes students, but also teachers and other staff employed in schools or present in school premises for any reason. A safe environment is necessary for everyone, not just students but also staff, including visitors who are potential victims of violence. The events that occurred at “Ribnikar,” including numerous other examples, confirm this.

Baldwin’s second question is “Security for what values?” Values are relatively enduring and socially desirable categories (Koković, 2008). The values protected in the context of school security primarily relate to physical integrity, dignity, and other human rights and freedoms.

The third question by Baldwin is “How much security?” Absolute security is not achievable. It is necessary to create conditions in schools where everyone, besides the absence of objective threats, does not feel endangered in any way subjectively. And when a certain threat exists, responses must be such as to minimize the occurrence of harmful consequences.

The next question is about what threats, or as Baldwin states, “from what threats?” This is a crucial question on the basis of which security assessments are made, threats are identified, priorities are set, etc. Threats are specific to each school environment. Generally, threats that can be faced are numerous. They can come from within the school environment, outside it, or from nature. We will mention some possible threats whose spectrum is wide: from peer violence, other forms of violent behavior, various forms of cyber threats, alcohol and drug use, sexual exploitation, affiliation with violent fan groups, sects, cults, then there are various risky behaviors leading to injury and self-harm, use of pyrotechnic devices, carrying and using cold and firearms, risks of fire, etc. Natural threats refer to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, storms, hail – which can endanger students and school staff. They do not happen often, but the consequences can be catastrophic. For this reason, threats from the natural environment deserve special attention, adequate preparation, and responses.

Baldwin’s fifth question is how, or by what means to achieve security? In the context of school security, this question, which deserves attention, is analyzed in detail in the following text.

The sixth question is at what cost? Security always has its price. How important is security to us, and what significance do we give it? Is it a primary, central, or marginal value? The more important the values we protect are to us, the more willing we are to invest in their protection.

The last, seventh question is for what period is it necessary to achieve security? When it comes to the educational system as one of the pillars of every society, security needs to be ensured through long-term planning policies.

2.1. How to Achieve Safety in Schools?

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive answer to this question. The means and measures to achieve planned goals depend on security assessments and available resources, both human and material. The measures taken require financial resources, primarily through hiring and training personnel, procurement of equipment, workshops, etc. This is the first barrier we face when discussing any aspect of security, including safety in schools. Safety has its price, and it is generally not small. For decision-makers, investing in safety is usually perceived as (unnecessary) cost rather than an investment to prevent harmful consequences, including catastrophic ones. This brings us back to the question of the cost of safety and the question of the values we want to protect. How much we invest in safety depends on how we perceive the values we are protecting and how we prioritize them. If the safety of students and staff in schools, including their lives, is a marginal value, investment in security will be minimal. If their safety is a key value, the approach to this issue will be entirely different. We also have the possibility that the safety of schools is declared a key value, but measures and resources to achieve these goals are lacking. If “investment” in safety is lacking, regardless of the official stance of decision-makers at various levels of decision-making, the safety of schools is a marginal value that is not given attention, and potential harmful consequences are tacitly accepted.

We will mention only some possible measures. Prevention comes first. Prevention is a term of broad meaning, often praised and disputed. Prevention programs can be diverse. Preventive activities include actions to prevent behaviors that can lead to harmful consequences. Prevention programs strengthen the security culture of students and teaching staff. The effects of prevention are not immediately visible, but results are achieved through long-term activities. Prevention programs are necessary in the process of strategic planning (where strategic planning exists). In practical discourse, prevention is often accompanied by stereotypes that the results are not measurable. Indicators for measuring prevention can include, for example, the number of conducted educations, activities (workshops, exercises, cultural events), conversations conducted by teachers, pedagogues, psychologists with students in contact with the law, students exhibiting deviant behaviors, or with other students who do not fall into the first two categories mentioned, as well as conversations with their parents or guardians, involvement of “deviant” students in school activities, a decrease in deviant behaviors and incidents, etc.

In theory and practice, there are concepts focusing on the prevention of behavior problems in childhood and adolescence and, on the other hand,

the improvement of safety in educational institutions. We will mention two models that can be adapted and applied in our social environment. The first is the concept of “positive school climate” (Popović-Čitić & Đurić, 2018). This concept provides great practical opportunities for planning preventive strategies, preventive programs, interventions, and treatments in the school environment. The second is the “concept of restorative practices in schools.”⁷ Restorative practice in schools represents an alternative to “traditional” school discipline that is not aimed at punishment but at repairing the harm through processes involving students and teachers. Restorative practices in schools involve strategies aimed at helping students throughout their elementary and secondary education, teaching them how to resolve conflicts, be responsible for their behavior, show empathy, and forgive – instead of traditional punishment. In the USA, the concept of restorative practices is widely represented in the educational system (Silverman & Mee, 2018; Velez et al., 2020).

Technical security measures are one way that can help create a safe environment in schools. For example, this includes video surveillance for visual monitoring of spaces. This measure primarily has a psychological effect. Then there is access control in buildings where necessary (metal detector doors). Alarms and notifications through internal notification systems – speakers are particularly important in crisis situations. Also, the alarm and notification system is extremely useful during exercises, i.e., simulations of real events. The downside of technical measures is their cost, considering that security equipment in the market is generally not cheap.

Physical security measures can also yield satisfactory results. If it concerns particularly vulnerable facilities or problematic environments in which these facilities are located, physical security measures are imperative. These activities can be entrusted to private security agencies. Standard measures that are implemented may include entrance and exit control, inspection of personal belongings when entering the facility to prevent the introduction of weapons, alcohol, drugs, pyrotechnic devices, and other prohibited items, preventing entry and retention of unauthorized persons in the school premises who pose a potential security threat. Physical security workers can assist in implementing prescribed procedures in the event of crisis situations such as fire evacuations, bomb threats, etc. Their role is in alerting and protecting

⁷ The concept of “restorative practices” originally stems from the criminal justice concept of restorative justice. Unlike retributive justice, which aims at retribution (vengeance), restorative justice is focused on repairing the harm caused by the criminal act. Restorative practices in schools do not involve offenders of criminal acts and offenses but rather focus on school discipline and relationships between students and teachers in the school environment.

students and staff in the case of serious threats, as well as seeking police assistance when needed.

A school police officer is also one of the measures. It is a program that has shown both positive and negative aspects in the practice of the Republic of Srpska. The presence of a police officer in schools has significant preventive importance. The establishment (or reactivation) of a school police officer is often a consequence of a tragic event in schools such as the one in 'Ribnikar'. In practice, in all modern police forces, the police are overloaded and typically lack personnel (Basinska & Wiciak, 2012; Queirós et al., 2020). Ensuring the constant presence of school police officers in every school facility is a major challenge for (overloaded) police structures, which may jeopardize the implementation of the school police program.

Procedural measures are of great importance in creating a safe environment in schools. In the broadest sense, procedural measures entail clearly prescribed instructions for dealing with security relevant events or incidents. Procedures are the result of security assessments and planning. It's not just about prescribed instructions that have bureaucratic significance, but about concise and practical instructions for everyone in the school institution to be fully acquainted with. Adhering to procedures prevents serious consequences and ultimately saves lives.⁸

Databases and analytics are significant tools that can greatly assist in the strategic planning process when it comes to school safety. Primarily, it is necessary to establish a uniform methodology for monitoring and reporting security-relevant incidents in schools. First, it is necessary to develop a methodology, and then educate staff to recognize various forms of security threats and report them to the authorities in accordance with the prescribed methodology. This way, we would have insight into periodic reports on trends of security-relevant incidents in schools, first at the level of the Republic of Srpska, then at the level of local communities, and ultimately we would have insight into what is happening in specific schools. Once we are aware of the extent of the occurrence, it is possible to identify problems and plan specific activities to address them.

The last, but by no means the least significant measure is education of the youth. Moreover, it is of paramount importance. Educating and raising awareness about the importance of student safety is a *sine qua non* condition for a safe school. Educating students in the context of safety culture is given special significance, which will be discussed further in the text.

⁸ For example, the instruction is that in the event of finding a suspicious item, it should not be touched, access should be restricted, the police should be called, etc. In the event of an explosion or gunfire, take cover, do not go into the hallways, do not approach windows, follow evacuation instructions, etc.

2.2. Schools and Security Culture

Culture (Lat. *cultus*, *colere* – nurture, cultivate) in the broadest sense is a way of life, the second nature of humans, everything that brings harmony and humanizes human nature with the aim of maintaining and advancing human society (Koković, 2008). Culture permeates all spheres of human life,⁹ including security. In this context, we speak of security culture. Security culture can be seen as a socially accepted way of protecting all processes, changes, and creations that result from spiritual and material creativity.¹⁰ Primarily, security culture should enable the satisfaction of the ontological need for security (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1954) and protect other social values. Security culture¹¹ creates patterns, institutions, social norms, symbols, rituals, myths that enable the creation of a safe environment, i.e., in the objective sense, the absence of threats to adopted values, and in the subjective sense, the absence of fear that adopted values will be endangered (Wolfers, 1952: 485).

In the context of safety in schools, the primary goal of security culture, in simplest terms, would be – to teach students to live safely. Education of students in security culture should develop awareness of dangers and teach them patterns of behavior and actions in security-relevant situations. Security culture in the education process would develop life skills of students, i.e., skills for avoiding risky behaviors, minimizing consequences, and surviving in high-risk situations, including providing assistance to others. Security culture in the context of schools is not only about students. Subjects of security culture in schools include, in addition to students, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, parents, and guardians.

Education in security culture should cover a wider range of knowledge. Young people are a vulnerable category facing numerous security challenges, risks, and threats. The existing education system in the Republic of Srpska does not sufficiently provide systematic knowledge through which young people would understand the dangers in the environment in which they live. By introducing a subject in the field of security culture, regardless of its formal name, young people would be enabled to familiarize themselves with current security challenges, risks, and threats, models for their early identification and response, as well as practical examples and ways of behaving in situations that endanger their personal safety, the safety of their peers, or the community in

⁹ For example: Politics – political culture; Religion – culture of interreligious dialogue and tolerance; Economy – business culture; Traffic – traffic culture, etc.

¹⁰ For more details on safety culture, see Stanarević, 2012.

¹¹ So everything that constitutes the "culture map" (for more details, see Koković, 2008, 41-72).

which they live. Special emphasis would be placed on raising awareness of the importance of prevention and the personal involvement of each individual in order to make community life safer.

Within the curriculum, special attention should be paid to topics such as non-violent communication, empathy, and community belonging, developing personal responsibility, conflict resolution, acquaintance with the role of the formal social control system, developing positive attitudes towards the police and other services, familiarization with the work of emergency services and methods of contact (police, ambulance, firefighters), peer violence, domestic violence, cyber threats, abuses on social networks, handling weapons, explosives, and pyrotechnic devices, travel safety (exchanges, guest appearances, excursions), substance abuse, alcoholism, gambling addiction, sexual exploitation, violence by fan groups, affiliation with destructive sects, etc. Traffic culture, providing first aid are also some of the very important topics. Additionally, students should acquire knowledge about actions in crisis situations. They would learn how to act in case of bomb threats,¹² immediate impending dangers (shootings, explosions, terrorist attacks), actions and survival strategies in the case of an active shooter, as well as procedures in case of fire, or in the case of an intruder entering a protected space, in this case, the school premises. Equally important are the topics of actions during elemental disasters and emergencies, such as lightning, stormy winds, floods, heavy snowfall, hail, earthquakes, pandemics.

2.3. Potential Benefits of Education in Safety Culture for Students

Education of students in the field of safety culture is of paramount importance in creating a safe environment in educational institutions. This represents an example of a systemic approach to school safety that is long-term and sustainable. In addition to theoretical instruction where students would acquire basic concepts from the curriculum, the focus would be on practical exercises, where students would learn how to act in different scenarios and thus acquire necessary skills. Students would gain basic knowledge and practical skills that would help them develop “resilience to environmental hazards,” thereby reducing the risks of their victimization.

Teachers who would teach this subject, in addition to instruction, could act as coordinators regarding activities (workshops, seminars, competitions),

¹² Bomb threats were a widespread occurrence in the Republic of Srpska and the region during the year 2022.

programs, projects, collaboration with other entities. Teachers would be trained to identify potential problems and take measures with professional services in schools (pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, special educators). The teaching staff in the field of safety culture could be initiators of positive changes in the school environment regarding safety. This could be achieved through proactive action, primarily through teaching by implementing concepts such as “positive school climate,” “restorative practices,” or similar programs. Teachers could serve as “liaison officers” for local communities where forums for citizen safety operate. Ideally, the teaching staff in security culture could be an important part of a broader concept and project – the security of local communities in the Republic of Srpska.

Introducing this subject into the school system would reduce the “dependence” on projects from the non-governmental sector. Collaboration with the non-governmental sector would certainly not be neglected, with needs being defined in schools with an adapted methodology, etc. As mentioned earlier, introducing a subject in the field of security culture would be a systemic, long-term, and sustainable solution regarding school safety in the Republic of Srpska.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to examine current issues regarding peer violence and school safety. Safety in schools has always been an important social issue. However, it particularly gains significance following the tragedy at “Ribnikar”. Tragic events serve as triggers for reassessing existing policies and practices. We began this work by defining peer violence. Peer violence is a frequent topic in public discourse in the Republic of Srpska. However, we have observed that institutional data on prevalence, types, and extent are not transparent, hence not accessible to the public, at least in terms of publicly available sources. The academic community in the Republic of Srpska has not been dedicated to researching peer violence. Additionally, peer violence and school safety are not topics that decision-makers have previously approached through the development of strategies and action plans. The lack of research and data on peer violence complicates strategic planning. In addition to peer violence, we have paid special attention to school safety. We initiated the discussion by questioning what a safe school is and how to achieve it. In that context, we examined the possibilities and practices that could be applied in schools in the Republic of Srpska. We particularly focused on the potential education of young people in the field of security culture. Introducing a subject

in which security culture would be studied, regardless of the formal name of the subject, would represent a long-term, sustainable solution that could yield positive results in the future and make schools in the Republic of Srpska safer in the long run. Social care for children in every civilized society, regardless of the level of its economic development, should be a priority – especially when it comes to their safety.

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