

MOBBING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS – EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE, OPTIONS FOR PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

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Abstract: *The chapter deals with mobbing, i.e. bullying at workplaces, with a special focus on school environment. It draws on an extensive survey in Czech primary schools that not only mapped this undesirable phenomenon but also investigated possible consequences of mobbing on interpersonal relationships among teachers, and on school climate. An important part of the chapter is an outline of possible defence against mobbing and of the basic prevention strategy.*

Keywords: *school, social climate of a school, interpersonal relationships, mobbing, bossing, experience, intervention, prevention*

Mobbing as a negative social phenomenon and its influence on school climate

With the development of the society and pressures of career advancement and an individual's performance in the labour market, the issue of *mobbing* - bullying at workplaces - is discussed more and more often. It can be assumed that similar problems will also exist in schools, and will be reflected naturally in the school's overall climate and operation. According to available sources, no broad-based surveys of issues relating to mobbing have ever been conducted in Czech schools and for that reason the author has made these issues the centre of his current professional and research interest.

Mobbing as a technical English term is gradually finding its way to Czech terminology because the Czech language does not have a fitting one-word name for that phenomenon. The problem is that the term *šikana*, which is closest in meaning to it, does not express the essence of mobbing in its entirety, and the two cannot be interchanged. *Šikana* occurs in rather primitive communities such as schools and the military environment, and it represents the simpler forms of aggression consisting in an absolute majority in physical attacks. In mobbing, on the other hand, the psychological form of attacks predominates, with mainly psychological and psychosoma-

tic damage. It is shrewder, more insidious, and long-term psychological terror that is often very inconspicuous and, compared with physical violence, more difficult to prove (Kantor, 2009, p. 37). To make it more comprehensible for the general public, the phrase *šikana na pracovišti* (bullying at workplace) is used as a possible Czech equivalent, in the narrow sense of the word mobbing is then used to describe emotional abuse among people at relatively the same or similar position at work. A specific form of mobbing in the work team is the so-called *bossing*, where the perpetrator is the boss, hence *bossing*. Bossing should be perceived as a more dangerous form of work psychological terror because the manager's duty is, first and foremost, to create favourable working conditions for people reporting to him, and because his position gives him a degree of power over the staff and under these circumstances he is abusing it, which, given his position and expectations about that position, is unacceptable (see Beňo, 2003, pp. 10 and 126). Another type of mobbing, albeit less frequent, that we may come across in technical literature, is the so-called *staffing*. Staffing is used to describe attacks of staff members against their managers or company managers with the objective of completely discrediting or destroying them or the entire human resources or corporate policies (Kraft, 2005, p. 16).

Effects of mobbing on school climate

After we have explained the fundamental characteristics of mobbing, the obvious next question is how the spread of this phenomenon in the workplace, whatever its modification, affects the work climate, interpersonal relationships and, last but not least, the job performance of individual employees. If we apply these considerations to the school environment, the problem becomes even more acute if we take into account the fact that the school is a place where we propose to mould young generations, which cannot be adequately done in a socially defective environment. Havlínová et al. (1994, pp 29–30) suggest that *quality of the environment*, as applied to the school, is determined by four factors:

- *ecological environment of the school*, which includes the material, physical and aesthetic qualities of the school as the living and working environment for all the people and groups operating there;
- *social environment of the school* - the quality and competence of individual and groups making up the organization (students, teachers, school administration, local municipal council, etc.);
- *social system in the school* - methods of communication, relationships and patterns of behaviour inside groups and between them;
- *school culture* - the system of beliefs, value priorities and cognitive and evaluative approaches and public opinion that exist, prevail or are required as target ones in the school.

It is obvious that mobbing in any shape and form will negatively affect all of the above constituent parts of the school environment and will negatively influence the overall *school climate*, which we define similarly as Spilková (2003, p. 342) as an overall

quality of interpersonal relationships and social processes in the given school, as the level of communication and interaction between all of the actors in the school educational processes including the school's social partners, long-term social and emotional set-up and relatively established patterns of behaviour that are founded on implicit or explicit values and rules of life in the school.

Research into mobbing in the Czech primary schools

We were confronted with several fundamental questions. What is the real situation in Czech schools? Does that phenomenon exist there? And if it does, to what extent does it exist there if we expect certain personality traits from our teachers where tendency toward mobbing should have no place? D. Kantor and I tried to find answers to these and many other questions in an extensive survey conducted in the school year 2008/2009 among teachers from primary schools in the Czech Republic. A quantitative research strategy was used, with a questionnaire as a research tool. Because the research was planned as representative, the questionnaire was verified several times and triangulated by independent specialists before it was posted in the electronic form on the Internet. From the database of Czech primary schools containing 4,194 schools we got teachers' addresses and contacted them directly with a request for their participation in the survey. The reason for this less-than-standard approach was to get our questionnaires directly to rank-and-file teachers and thus to evade the risk of school management preventing teachers from participating in the survey. A total of 1,135 teachers participated in the survey and, after the questionnaires were processed, the final research sample was made up of 1,103 respondents.

From a large body research data some of which are still being evaluated, we offer to the readers of this publication some intermediate results that map, at a descriptive level, the incidence of mobbing in Czech primary school.

Primary school teachers as victims of mobbing

What is the real situation in Czech primary schools? Does mobbing exist there, and if it does, how widespread is it? The diagram below shows how many teachers claim to have been victims of psychological aggression of mobbers during their professional career, both from among their peers and school management.

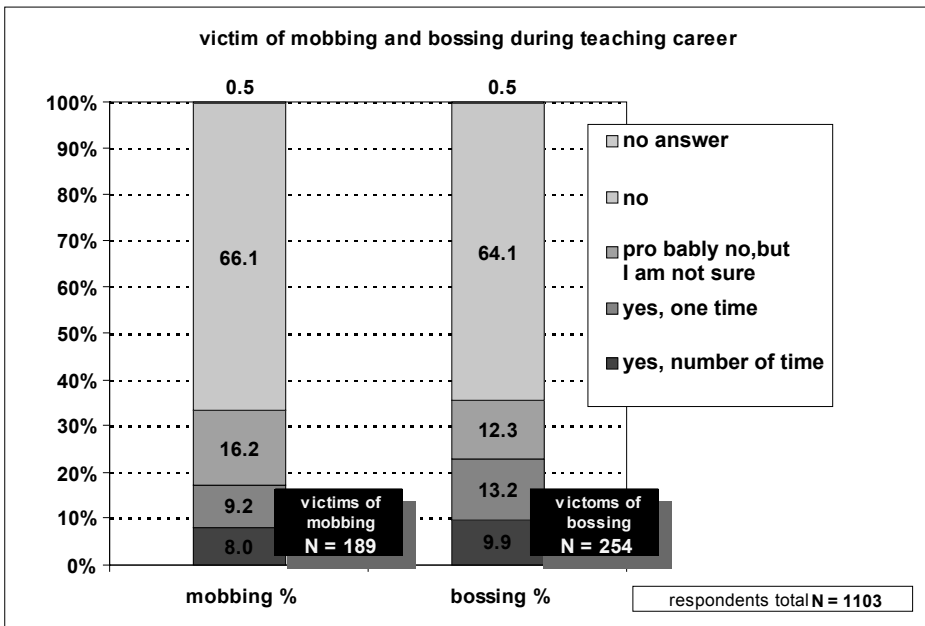


Fig. 1: Victims of mobbing and bossing during the teaching career

It follows from the diagram that at least 17.2 % of the teachers inquired considered themselves mobbing victims at some time during their teaching career (of which 8 % repeatedly), and 23.1 % were subject to psychological pressure from their superiors (9.9 % repeatedly).

Of the groups of respondents who experienced mobbing in the school, the largest group were teachers who were bullied for more than a year (of all the respondents, 33.9 % teachers suffered mobbing and 43.3 % bossing). This is demonstrated in Fig. 2.

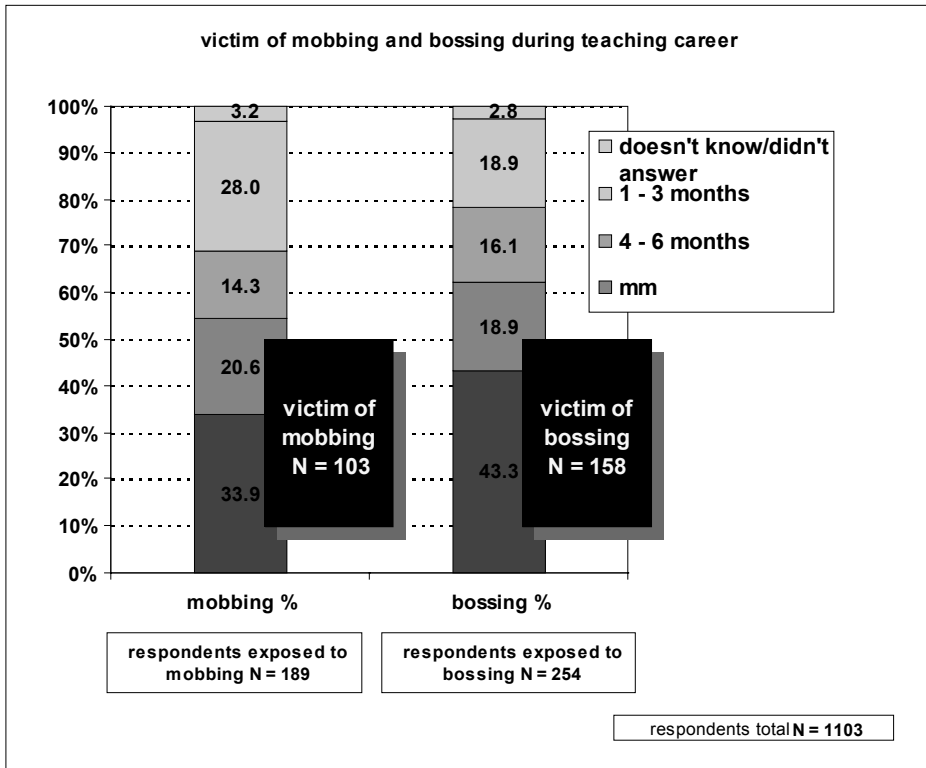


Fig. 2: Victims of mobbing and bossing during their teaching career by duration

Numbers of respondents who stated that they had been victims of mobbing and bossing need to be related to the definition of mobbing, which says that mobbing (bossing) in a professional setting occurred if that kind of behaviour was very frequent and took place over a long period of time. The diagram thus also gives a true numbers of respondents subjected to mobbing (N=103, i.e. 9.3 % of all respondents) and bossing (N=158; 14.3 %) if we apply the definition of mobbing and defined long-term attacks as attacks over a period of at least 6 months. These data give a more realistic view of the incidence of mobbing in schools and at least partly eliminate subjectivity and an incorrect understanding of the true nature of mobbing.

Of the teachers who considered themselves subjected to mobbing during their professional career, 46 % were subjected to mobbing and 62.6 % to bossing in the school year 2008/2009 (Fig. 3). In the overall context of teacher population included in our research sample, the same numbers of teachers (i.e. 7.1 %, N = 78) consider themselves at present victims of mobbing or bossing in their schools.

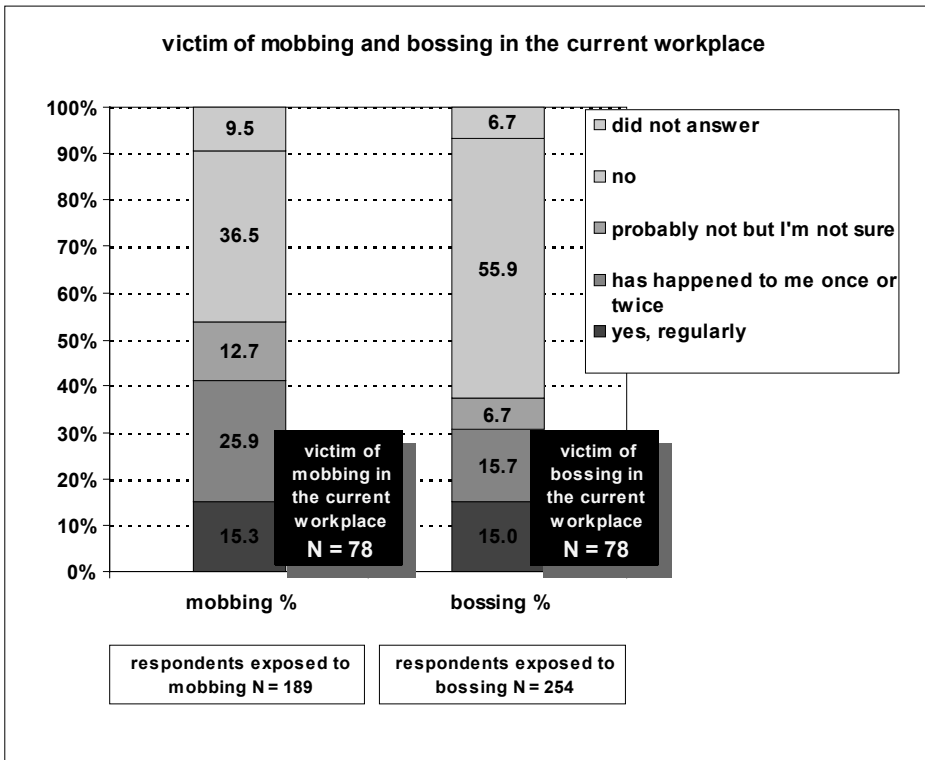


Fig. 3: Victims of mobbing and bossing at their current workplace

If we take another look at the time span for which the respondents were subjected to bullying in the school year 2008/2009 (Fig. 4), we may conclude that 52 % of respondents (N = 41; i.e. 3.7 % of all respondents) were subjected to genuine mobbing (closely corresponding to the definition of mobbing from the duration point of view) in that school year, and 57.6 % (N = 45; i.e. 4.1 % of all respondents in the survey) were subjected to bossing.

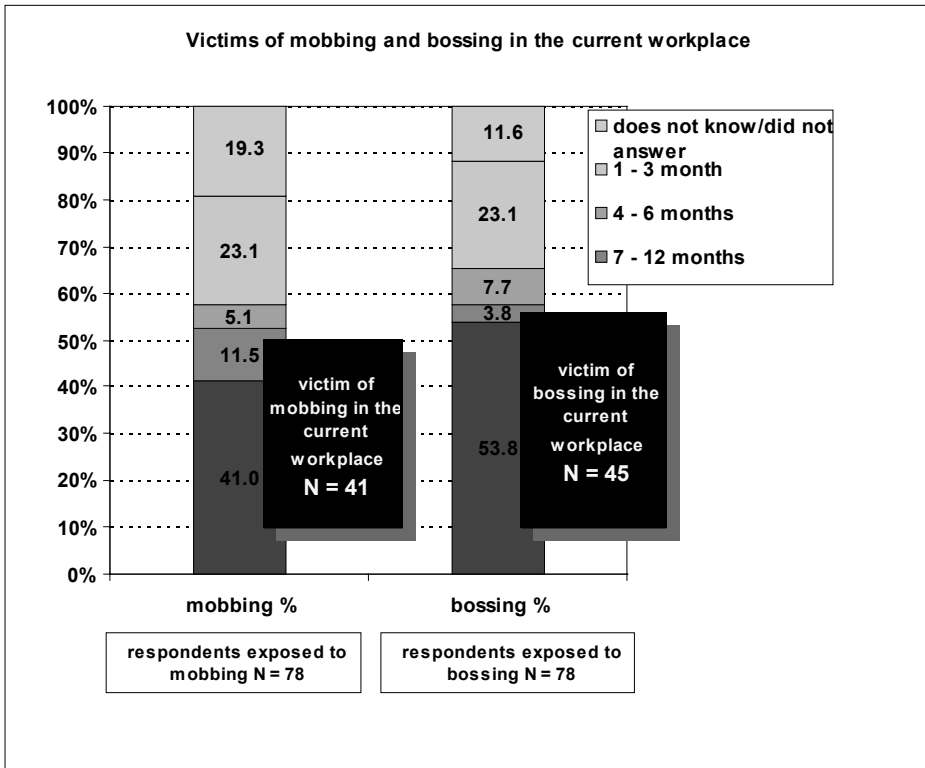


Fig. 4: Victims of mobbing and bossing at their current workplace by duration

Protection against mobbing

If we have demonstrated in the paragraphs above that mobbing is not an unknown phenomenon for many primary school teachers and showed what fundamental and many times fatal consequences it may have for its victims, for relationships in the school and thus for the overall school climate, it would be appropriate, also in view of the target group of this publication, to outline the ways how to defend oneself against mobbing.

As a rule, mobbing is triggered by some unresolved or inadequately settled conflict, and for that reason resilience largely depends on one's self-confidence, self-assurance, the ability to withstand stress and, very importantly, on one's skills for the resolution of conflicts and problems. In this respect, tougher characters have more than only a negligible advantage in that they are capable of facing the problem at hand and they do not run away from it. Also important is a sound family background, whether the victim has friends and whether he is a part of a social network because loneliness and the feelings of inferiority and uselessness are extremely dangerous and destructive factors for the start of mobbing. Good financial situation may help - if the victim is financially secured then he does not need to stay in the job where he is subjected to mobbing and enjoys a degree of independence and freedom to leave that job. Resilience also de-

depends on the employee's qualifications and his value on labour market. If he has a high and much sought-after qualification, he is less likely to be threatened by mobbing than a person who is dependent on a narrowly specialized job (see Janoušek, 2004).

However, generally speaking, it is not an easy thing to defend oneself effectively against mobbing, particularly in poorly managed workplaces. This is manifested e.g. by the fact that employees do not know their exact job definitions, and that tasks, responsibilities and rights of every member of the group are not clearly defined. Neither are information flows clearly defined, i.e. who from the school staff should give information to, or receive information from, whom. If, moreover, the prevailing feeling in the workplace is that whatever one does always ends up in a mess that somebody will be punished for in one way or another, the chances of running against a mobbing trap are very high.

Borská (2005, p. 9) says that mobbing "can be either parried with a counter-attack, or evaded. Both strategies are basically effective because their purpose is to prevent the destruction of the victim. If the victim does not feel strong enough, it is not a defeat to leave such an environment. On the other hand, it will bolster the mobber's self-confidence and brazenness to behave the same in the future because his manipulative tactics proved effective." Huberová (1995, p. 114) believes that it is important to start by answering a question whether there is still any chance of an amicable settlement. In spite of doubts, it makes sense to at least try it - in these attempts, we should set ourselves clearly defined deadlines and if the matter is not settled by the previously set deadline, we should promptly draw the conclusions to make sure that the psychological terror does not become a nightmare that will destroy us.

How can we help ourselves?

- a) *Use well thought-out conflict resolution tactics* - define the conflict (who, with whom and the cause), process the conflict (discuss the problem and present proposals for its resolution), conflict settlement (decision, usually a compromise, everybody will be informed about).
- b) *Reconciliation* – the conflict can be completely eliminated only after the two parties have made peace with each other.
- c) *Family and friends* – to speak about one's problems in one's family, to confine to a suitable partner, not to forget other people's problems and to accentuate the positive.
- d) *Relaxation* – who is tense all the time is more liable to make all kinds of mistakes.
- e) *Illusory help* – neither alcohol, drugs nor medications will solve problems.

If it can be done, it is useful to **contact the employer**. Every employee has the right to file a complaint with his employer and the employer has the duty to deal with the complaint if the employee considers himself a victim of mobbing. If the complaint is justified, it is the employer's duty to rectify the situation.

Another option can be to **ask colleagues for help** - mobbing cannot go unnoticed and usually the victim's closest co-workers will be first to notice it. Colleagues who

see the aggressor's behaviour and remain silent, irrespective of what reason they may have, become in a way his accomplices. It is important to pluck up one's courage and, for instance:

- a) send a signal of help to the victim
- b) break through the wall of silence step by step
- c) point out to the basic problem - name the underlying conflict
- d) together choose the person to act as a mediator
- e) stay active even after the conflict was settled (Huberová, 1995, pp. 114–122).

P. Beňo (2003, pp. 86–87) defines and recommends five principles that victims should bear in mind when they decide to defend themselves against mobbing:

1. “Keep in mind that the decision whether “to go or to stay” is always your choice.
2. Don't take things lying down and “grab the bull by the horns”.
3. You won't be able to cope with it on your own - find an ally.
4. Make it clear in your mind what you want to achieve and what strategy you will choose, but then do not hesitate any more and “go at it”. Keep a log of your grievances. Do not forget “documents” that can help. And do not forget the importance of effective communication and the art of asserting oneself.
5. Even a defeat can be the beginning of a victory.”

If the victim decides to defend himself against mobbing, it is important that he does it as soon as possible, preferably immediately when the mobbing begins. The problem is, of course, that the victim may not even know that the first stage of mobbing has begun. In case one's own solution fails, the victim should seek help from a specialist, which may, however, take a lot of time. Unfortunately we have to admit that very often the most effective defence left for the victim is to leave the workplace.

Possibilities for prevention

A big problem from the prevention-of-mobbing point of view is that so far little is known about it and that mobbing is little is talked about, which is confirmed by other intermediate results of present research into teachers' awareness of mobbing (Čech, 2009, pp. 221–223). In cases of mobbing, early prevention and awareness are more effective than necessary protection and intervention. First, it is important to increase general awareness of the phenomenon of mobbing - it is necessary to talk about it, organize workshops on mobbing and conflict resolution by both trade unions, school specialists (prevention method advisors, school psychologists) and, first of all, by the school management. The optimum situation would be to include anti-mobbing measures to internal school regulations, or to appoint somebody to deal with mobbing and, first and foremost, to develop legal awareness as a pillar of prevention.

In many countries of western and northern Europe, companies adopt the so-called anti-mobbing measures, which mean that every newcomer to the company is explained the agreement between the unions and the management and should know what to do in the case of mobbing. Anti-mobbing agreements and a “BossWatch” should become

a primary objective of trade unions, and money should come only second. In this country, it is unfortunately the other way round and mobbing or bossing are unknown words for many a trade union representatives (see Kantor, 2007, p. 37).

Work and interpersonal relationships and work climate differ from one organisation, team, group, or even office or school laboratory to another. For a man to feel good at work as much as possible, it is important that all people behave to each other as he wants others to behave to him. One should never have the feeling of being afraid of somebody at work. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of mobbing in a workplace is getting more and more frequent, creating an awkward climate there, full of tension, stress and fear. Acts of personal courage against psychological terror in the workplace will not only help its victims but will also make sure that the word mobbing will lose some of its fearsome connotations. Democracy will work only where the community shows enough courage and ordinary citizens are brave enough. Bullying, mobbing, bossing, harassment, discrimination, or the furthering of one's egoistic interest at the expense of others must not be put up with in a democratic state. Neither in the workplace, nor in the family, at school, in the office, politics, in public or in the private. Sometimes very little is needed - just some understanding, sympathy, compassion and respect for others.

MOBBING V PROSTŘEDÍ ZÁKLADNÍCH ŠKOL – VLIV NA INTERPERSONÁLNÍ VZTAHY A KLIMA ŠKOLY, MOŽNOSTI OBRANY A PREVENCE

Abstrakt: Kapitola se zabývá problematikou mobbingu, tedy šikany na pracovišti, a to se zaměřením na prostředí školy. Vychází z rozsáhlého výzkumného šetření v českých základních školách zaměřeného, zaměřuje se nejen na mapování tohoto nežádoucího fenoménu, ale také na možné důsledky jeho výskytu na interpersonální vztahy mezi pedagogy a klima školy. Zásadní součástí kapitoly je nastínit možné obrany před mobbingem a základní strategie prevence.

Klíčová slova: škola, školní klima, mezilidské vztahy, mobbing, bossing, zkušenosti, výskyt, obrana, prevence