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## THE ROLE OF ACTION RESEARCH IN THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT COMMUNICATION OF STUDENTS<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** Modern educational work requires dedication, improvement and innovation of educational practice. Being a pedagogical worker (educator, teacher) reflective practitioner is a challenge of the postmodern age in the field of upbringing and education. The aim of this article is preventive action in the aspect of violent communication through the application of action research. A total of fifteen students participated. The research included certain phases and steps that we purposefully followed. We first noticed the educational problem and focused our attention on designing activities and content. With a range of detailed and selected activities (lectures, problem situations, workshops and interactive games), we tried to act preventively in the field of violent communication. Finally, in the summative evaluation of the program effects process, an overview of the results is given before and after the research. The obtained results show that the applied contents and activities had a positive effect on students in the field of reducing and preventing violent communication. Orientation towards the development of non-violent communication must take an honorable place in the modern system of upbringing and education, because in that way forms of violent and forms of successful communication can be reduced and eliminated.

**Key words:** action research, nonviolent communication, prevention, school, violent communication.

### Introduction

Modern educational practice abounds in a range of challenges that practitioners face in their daily work. One of the current challenges and problems that is very often present among students is violent communication. Recent literature is increasingly talking about how much attention needs to be focused on non-violent communication, as well as the benefits it brings.

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In addition to the range of possibilities of how to act preventively in the direction of violent communication, one of the possible ways is action research. What is action research? In addition to many definitions, one of them is that „action research is a flexible process in which action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) change. They are used to gather information about the implementation of a social action or intervention, and the action means any social action“ (Maksimović, 2010: 119). Action research is pictorial, close, concrete and gives practitioners the opportunity to use it on a daily basis. Therefore, a pedagogical worker in daily contact with students can see educational problems. Problems can be various, such as bad behavior of students, bad hygiene habits, peer violence, poorer school achievements, adoption of teaching materials, lack of understanding of the field and many others. Thus, within the system of upbringing and education, the goal of action research is to improve the quality of life of students (Mills, 2011). Therefore, in order for the quality of students in the school environment to be successful, it is necessary to focus on reducing and removing obstacles that disrupt the pleasant school atmosphere. Violent communications lead to a variety of negative outcomes. Certainly, the school environment must not be a space in which negative forms of behavior are present and must actively work on educational activities aimed at promoting good behavior of students.

Starting from the increasingly present level of violence and violent communication between children and young people, we have focused our work on this very topical educational problem. Taking into account the above, with this article we will try to show the role of action research in the prevention of violent communication in students of younger grades of primary school.

### **(NON)violent communication among students**

Today, there is more and more talk about the importance of the quality of communication in the system of upbringing and education. „Communication can be simply defined as interaction through signs. The process of communication itself implies the transmission of messages through signs from the sender to the recipient“ (Milovanović, 2016: 103). The basis of successful educational work is considered to be quality and two-way communication in different relations - teacher-student; student-student. We are increasingly faced with the problem of violence, which is most often accompanied by aggressive or violent communication. The authors pay great attention and direct it towards overcoming violent communication and promoting non-violent communication (Džaferović, 2012; Qudysi et al., 2018; Suzić et al., 2018). Thus, by violent communication we mean violent behavior in the process of communication that is accompanied by insults, swearing, belittling, discrimination, prejudice at various levels and many others (Rosenberg, 2006). Nowadays, children and young people often use the language of violent communication. This style of communication is most often present in students in their informal groups. Violent communication carries with it exposure to other forms of violence. Immature behavior based on continuous conflicts, quarrels, insults, ridicule and aspirations to degrade another person is not acceptable. Exposure to such treatment of child development can have a number of negative effects. In the development of non-violent communication, it is necessary to start from the earliest days and point out its danger and harmfulness. „Nonviolent communication consists of four skills: distinguishing observations from evaluations; identifying, experiencing and expressing feelings; connecting feelings with needs and setting and responding to demands in order to contribute to human prosperity ” (Latini, 2009: 20). Therefore, non-violent communication implies the possession of important skills that make an individual's life more complete and better, as well as relationships with other people who become healthier and more mature. The family as the core of security and the development of the good must be directed towards

suppressing violent and building non-violent communication. In addition to the family, school is an indispensable factor that must first act in all aspects of prevention (primary, secondary and tertiary). The school must build a unique value system among students, through the search for activities and ways to avoid potential problems. When a problem arises, activities must be effective and clearly directed to the core of the problem so that it is overcome and not deepened. It is necessary to additionally raise awareness among teachers and educators about the importance of prevention in the field of violent communication. When they have a developed awareness of the risks of violent communication, as well as the knowledge and skills needed to prevent it, they will be able to adequately respond and act in the prevention of violent and the development and encouragement of nonviolent communication.

### **Methodological framework of research**

Based on the held consultations with the actors of the educational work, it was established that one of the most current problems is violent communication. The application of modern information and communication technologies among children has significantly influenced the adoption of bad and inappropriate terms that are very often used in mutual communication and conflict situations. The pursuit of non-violent communication is the basis for building a quality personality and building valid relationships. Guided by this idea, the problem of our research is: *Can the realization of action research be used preventively in the aspect of violent communication?* In accordance with the time in which we live and the dominance of the phenomenon of violence in various fields, the problem is very current and relevant to modern educational practice.

The subject of this research is the role of action research in the prevention of violent communication. The aim of the research is preventive action in the aspect of violent communication through the application of action research. Based on the problem, subject and goal of the research, the focus will be on: training teachers to apply action research and preventive action in the field of violent communication; improving communication styles among students; encouraging non-violent communication and developing prosocial forms of behavior. The research will be guided by the following tasks: how much students are familiar with the characteristics of violent communication; whether students know how to recognize the presence of violent communication; what forms of violent communication are present in the school life of students; how students react in created problem situations; to whom students turn due to situations accompanied by violent communication; what are the students' impressions of this way of working and the implemented project. The research included 15 primary school students (eleven girls and four boys). Therefore, in cooperation with teachers, we noticed an adequate problem and in cooperation with them approached the implementation. The first phase of our research concerned the selection of adequate activities that will be implemented in order to prevent violent communication. With the help of experts, the contents and activities adjusted to the age of the students were selected. Together with the teachers who wanted to participate, two online meetings were held where the teachers were introduced to the characteristics of action research, the way of conducting it and the mutual exchange of ideas on how the research will be conducted. Then came the step of implementation of activities and finally the evaluation of the process to see the importance, contribution and end results of the implemented activities.

### **Planning and reflection phase**

Getting into the process of changing the existing educational practice is a very challenging step, which implies readiness for positive and negative end results. Modern pedagogical

workers are expected to be ready to change the existing situation, to innovate and to be ready for permanent education and to improve all levels and types of competencies. In the planning phase, we first started by talking to teachers and associates in order to find an adequate problem. The pedagogical workers agreed with the idea of applying action research in the aspect of prevention of violent communication. Through joint work and cooperation as a basis for success, we have considered proposals on the content that will be implemented. Great benefit to this research was given by pedagogical workers with their knowledge and skills from practice. As the pandemic has significantly affected the course of our lives, conversations and meetings with interested teachers were conducted online, through Zoom meetings. The first meeting was aimed at finding an educational problem, while the second meeting was held in order to acquaint teachers with action research. A Power Point presentation with key information on action research and the importance of preventing violent communication among students was applied.

### Implementation of activities and evaluation

In order to prevent violent communication among students, we applied a range of activities. As the pedagogical-psychological literature is rich in contents related to the phenomenon of violence, aggression, as well as violent and non-violent communication, we have read in detail and reviewed the possibilities that can be applied. As one of the characteristics of a teacher is a reflective practitioner and the introduction of originality and creativity in their own work, we tried to adapt and change certain existing activities. Great support was given by teachers who know the personality characteristics of students very well. Their ideas were crucial. We first started with the well-known *brainstorming* technique. So, ideas and proposals were presented, and then the selection was purposefully directed towards our researched problem. The following activities were realized with students: lectures to students about the risks of violence and violent communication, giving problem situations and monitoring their implementation, workshop Who to contact and say NO to violent communication, interactive game YES/NO (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Schematic representation of implemented activities

- *Lecture to students on the risks of violence and violent communication.* A group of students who sampled our research attended an interactive lecture on the risks of violence and violent communication. As the students of the younger grades of primary school are concerned, the interactive lecture lasted 40 minutes, due to their attention and concentration. During the lecture, the benefits of modern information and communication technology were used. In the introductory part, the association through which the students had to discover the final solution was applied. The topic of the lecture was hidden in the field of the final solution. This method was approached at the very beginning due to the motivation of the students. After the discovery of the final solution (the title of the lecture), a story followed about the dangers of violence and violent communication, as well as the very characteristics of violent communication. Students asked questions and engaged in a discussion which gave the answer that they were interested in the topic and to actively participate in the whole process.

- *Problem situations.* During this activity, the emphasis is on role play. The students were free to choose the desired place in the space and listen to the instructions. Certain situations that were directed towards everyday situations in the school environment were explained. The students had to imagine a certain situation and present in small groups how to solve the problem and how they would act. Also, with a short puppet show, with the use of snake and giraffe speech, students were able to get acquainted with the positive and negative ways of communication.

- *Workshop To whom should I turn and say NO to violent communication.* This pedagogical workshop focused on the topic of violent communication, how students can recognize violent communication and who to turn to students due to situations accompanied by violent communication. The workshop brings with it many benefits and must become a more frequent way of working (Milanović & Maksimović, 2021). During the workshop, attention was focused on the rules of the workshop mode of work, as follows: sitting in a circle; every student has the right to express an opinion, as well as to be heard with respect and appreciation; the student can say pass if he does not want to answer the given question, everyone actively participates, there are no correct and incorrect answers (Janković & Kovač-Cerović, 1995). The atmosphere was very pleasant and accompanied by alternating laughter and seriousness of the students, which was accompanied by a series of questions on the given topic. The workshop started with a step aimed at relaxing and releasing students, most of it was focused on the main topic and the end of the workshop was completed by drawing students on the topic of (NON)violent communication. At the very end, the students presented their drawings and explained what they had drawn. Each work was hung on a hammer and accompanied by great applause and praise from students. The messages of non-violent communication were highlighted, which will remain as a reminder to students about the valid behavior and manner of communication.

- *The YES/NO game* is the next activity that was implemented and with it we emphasized possible ways to improve communication between students. The students had green and red flowers on a stick made of props. The green flower was intended for the correct answer or agreement of the students with the statement, while the red flower was intended for the disagreement of the students with the statement they hear. The course of the game was such that they first heard the claim and, if they agreed with it, to raise the appropriate stick with the flower. Statements and claims were adapted to the age characteristics of the children. Also, the students explained why they agree or disagree with the statements they heard. Teachers asked certain sub-questions and "challenged" students during the presentation so that they could better acquire knowledge and skills, as well as understand and accept certain techniques and skills of good communication. In this way, we encouraged and strengthened students' critical thinking, argumentation and moral reasoning. The activity ended with the reading and analysis of a poem that talks about this topic.

As mentioned several times, the role, contribution and cooperation of teachers was very large and of great benefit for conducting this research. Pedagogical workers recorded in detail and very gradually the course of realization of activities, participation and activities of students and kept a clear record throughout the project.

### Summative evaluation of the program effect process

The last part of the research is the phase of summative evaluation of the effects of the program. At this stage, we see the end effects that we came to by applying action research. Therefore, in this section we will present the results we obtained before the research and after the research. Each presented segment was performed with students at the very beginning, before the research and after the research. Therefore, in this way we tried to find out and determine whether the implemented activities contributed to the prevention of violent communication.

**Table 1.** Familiarity of students with violent communication before the research

	f	(%)
I heard about violent communication	4	26,67
I have not heard of violent communication	11	73,33

Prior to the survey, only 4 (26.67%) students answered that they had heard of the phrase violent communication, while more than half of the students, as many as 11 (73.33%) had not heard of this term. After the applied activities, we performed an evaluation and noticed that all students answered that they are familiar with the term violent communication.

**Table 2.** Students' explanations of the meaning of violent communication before research

	f	(%)
Can explain the meaning of the term violent communication	2	13,33
Can't explain the meaning of the term violent communication	13	86,67

If students had heard of the term violent communication they could explain what it represents (Table 2). Only two students were able to explain what violent communication is, while the other two students who stated that they had heard of this term did not know how to explain.

We asked the students if they experienced any of the ways of violent communication among their peers at school. We offered students some of the forms of violent communication. This question was of a combined type and it was very clearly explained to the students that they can add some other form of violent communication if it is not listed among the listed forms.

**Table 3.** Forms of violent communication among peers before the research

	f	(%)
Insult	6	40
Threats	1	6,67
Cursing	5	33,33
Ridicule	3	20

As shown in Table 3, the most common forms of violent communication among students were insults (40%), threats (6.67%), as well as swearing (33.33%) and ridicule (20%). By applying purposefully created activities, we tried to influence and reduce the presence of these forms of violent communication.

**Table 4.** Forms of violent communication among peers after the research

	<i>f</i>	(%)
Insult	2	13,33
Threats	0	0
Cursing	3	20
Ridicule	0	0

Looking at the answers of students before and after the research, we notice significant differences. Forms of violent communication such as threats and ridicule were not present at all, while forms of insults and swearing were reduced. Certainly, additional thematic activities would be needed in order to reduce and eliminate the currently present forms.

Then we wanted to look at the actions of students before and after the research in the given problem situations.

**Table 5.** Students' behavior in problem situations before the research

	<i>f</i>	(%)
The students focused on resolving the situation on violent behavior and violent communication	10	66,67
Students focused on prosocial behavior practices	5	33,33

Before the research, students were given certain problem situations in which they participated in small groups. Topics of problem situations concerned the school environment and functioning in the school. In Table 5 we see that only 5 (33.33%) students solved the problem situation in a peaceful way and using prosocial behavior and non-violent communication, while the other 10 (66.67%) solved the problem by explicit violent communication that could turn into a physical form of violence.

**Table 6.** Students' behavior in problem situations after the research

	<i>f</i>	(%)
The students focused on resolving the situation on violent behavior and violent communication	1	6,67
Students focused on prosocial behavior practices	14	93,33

After the activities, almost all students solved situations by non-violent communication, focusing on prosocial forms of behavior, while one student showed a tendency to the presence of violent communication, but the presence of violent communication was much reduced than before the study (Table 6).

We tried to see who the students turned to after noticing violent communication in their own situation or the situation of their peers. Before the research, 4 (26.67%) students stated that they contact a teacher, 1 (6.67%) a professional associate, 2 (13.33%) a friend and even 8 (53.33%) students did not address no one, while none of the students replied to address the parents. After the research and the implementation of various activities, the results showed the following: 13 (86.67%) students turned to a teacher, 1 (6.67%) to a parent and 1 (6.67%) to a friend. After noticing the presence of violent communication, it is extremely important to

focus on its perception and action. Therefore, it is very important when students notice the presence of violent communication to turn to an adult. Since this is about the institutional collective life of students, it is very important to turn to educators or teachers and present a certain problem. In that way, one can immediately react preventively in order to reduce and eliminate the problem. Also, pedagogical workers must monitor the behaviors and actions of students in different situations, perceive and analyze and independently organize certain thematic activities. Building trust is the basis of good relationships and communication. If students have a good attitude towards the pedagogical worker, the freedom to address him and present the problem to the quality of interaction and communication will be better. Therefore, the fundamental characteristics of good communication pedagogical workers must give space in pedagogical work with students.

We wanted to find out how the students were during the program. They presented their observations with an open question.

**Table 7.** Impressions of students about participation in the program after the research

During the activity it was:	f	(%)
Boring	0	0
Interesting and pleasant	2	13,33
Very interesting and pleasant	13	86,67

So, all the students' answers were very positive. The students stated that during the conducted activities, they liked the most the following:

- Giraffe and snake speech and the use of puppets to further explain positive and negative speech;
- Freedom to express their opinion;
- An atmosphere that was accompanied by laughter, play and socializing;
- Opportunity to learn something new and very useful.

The impressions of the teachers who participated in the program from the very beginning to the end are as follows:

- Pleasure and honor to participate and learn something new;
- We did not encounter action research during the studies and this is the first time I have had the opportunity to officially participate in such a program;
- We are delighted with the proposed literature that we can use to apply action research and prevent violent communication;
- In professional work we will apply action research, because the process and monitoring the effects is a very exciting and important step towards improving practice.

Based on the detailed and reduced impressions, we notice that students and teachers are very satisfied with this way of working. The great success of this research is that it shows significant progress in the success and improvement of educational practice - from violent to non-violent communication.

### Conclusion

The current topic in modern educational work is the phenomenon of violence, aggression and other forms of negative behavior. With this work, we put the emphasis on the spectrum of violent communication. The aim of the article was preventive action in the aspect of violent communication through the application of action research. Therefore, we tried to influence the prevention of violent communication by applying action research. By conducting the



results of this work, it was once again confirmed that action research is very useful for educational practice. In cooperation with the teachers, we have chosen the current educational problem. In their opinion, it was about violent communication as a common form of inappropriate student behavior. In order for teachers to be able to approach the implementation in the most favorable and adequate way, online meetings were reflected in order to acquaint them with the characteristics and during action research, as well as the relevance of their application in the field of violent communication prevention. Then, the steps on the realization of the program were thoroughly designed. As stated, during the program, pedagogical activities were selected as follows: interactive lecture on violent communication, problem situations, workshop, interactive game. Based on the analyzed results of the research and applied activities, we came to the final conclusions: students are familiar with the characteristics of violent communication and can explain this term and the risks that such communication can lead, students know how to recognize the presence and tendency of violent communication among students, students know who to turn to when they notice violent communication. Also, the students stated that they were very pleasant during the program and that they would like to repeat this way of working. They are very satisfied with the way the activities were carried out, as well as the way the teachers carried them out. Active participation of students, positive effects of applied activities, pleasant atmosphere accompanied by interactive games showed that well-designed activities and high quality implementation brings positive and valid end effects.

We believe that these activities need to be repeated and introduce additional content and thematic activities, as well as other methodological procedures aimed at preventing violent communication. In order for the effects to be continuously positive, it is very important to remind students of the importance of the process of good, tolerant and two-way communication. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce and eradicate violent communication, as well as to strengthen and develop patterns of non-violent communication accompanied by prosocial values and actions. The idea of this research can be an incentive for practitioners to focus on the application of action research in the direction of promoting non-violent communication, empathy and tolerance among students, as well as preventing violent and aggressive behavior of students.

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