Psicologia Escolar e Educacional

CYBERBULLYING IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to understand the teachers' conception of cyberbullying and the strategies used to deal with these situations at school. It is an exploratory study with a qualitative approach. The empirical field of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews carried out with six teachers from a public elementary and high school in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul state. After analyzing the interviews, two categories were created, namely: Violence outside the school: teachers' perception and Actions to cope and fight cyberbullying developed by the school. It was possible to identify the existing weaknesses in the school, referring to the effectiveness in solving the problem of violence, in the teachers' view. It emphasizes the importance of initial and continuing education for professionals who work directly with those involved, so that interventions in this aspect are more successful.

Keywords: violence; cyberbullying; teachers

Cyberbullying en el contexto escolar: La percepción de los profesores

RESUMEN

El objetivo del estudio fue comprender la concepción de los profesores sobre el *cyberbullying* y las estrategias utilizadas en el enfrentamiento de esas situaciones en la escuela. E trata de un estudio exploratorio de abordaje cualitativo. El campo empírico de la investigación se constituyó de entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas con seis profesores de una escuela pública de Enseñanza Primaria y Secundaria del interior do Rio Grande do Sul. Tras el análisis de las entrevistas originaron dos categorías denominadas: Violencia extramuros de la escuela: percepción de los profesores y Acciones de enfrentamiento y combate al *cyberbullying* desarrolladas por la escuela. Fue posible identificar las fragilidades existentes en la escuela, referente a la efectividad en la solución de la problemática de la violencia, en la mirada de los profesores. Se pone de relieve la importancia de una formación inicial y continuada para los profesionales que actúan directamente con los abarcados con la finalidad de que las intervenciones en ese aspecto sean logradas.

Palabras clave: violencia; *cyberbullying*; professores

Cyberbullying no contexto escolar: A percepção dos professores

RESUMO

O objetivo do estudo foi compreender a concepção dos professores sobre o *cyberbullying* e as estratégias utilizadas no enfrentamento dessas situações na escola. É um estudo exploratório de abordagem qualitativa. O campo empírico da pesquisa foi constituído de entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com seis professores de uma escola pública de Ensino Fundamental e Médio do interior do Rio Grande do Sul. Após análise das entrevistas, duas categorias foram originadas, quais sejam: Violência extramuros da escola: percepção dos professores e Ações de enfrentamento e combate ao *cyberbullying* desenvolvidas pela escola. Foi possível identificar as fragilidades existentes na escola, referentes à efetividade na resolução da problemática da violência, na visão dos professores. Ressalta-se a importância de uma formação inicial e continuada para os profissionais que atuam diretamente com os envolvidos a fim de que as intervenções nesse aspecto sejam mais bem-sucedidas.

Palavras-chave: violência; cyberbullying; professores

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INTRODUCTION

Socially constructed, violence has become an increasingly evident phenomenon in our society. It assumes diverse degrees of intensity according to the social structure in which it is inserted. It consists of a complex phenomenon, with multiple causes of sociopolitical order, with an impact in public health, and affecting individual and collective well-being (Minayo, 2013; Stelko-Pereira & Willians, 2010).

Because they are major environments for interaction among peers, schools might become risky contexts for violence situations. In turn, such situations present themselves as a huge problem for education nowadays (Wendt, Campos, & Lisboa, 2010). Until quite recently, such violence was confined into school premises. However, the advent of technology and the emergence of social networks has created an online version of violence, also known as cyberbullying (Camacho, Hassanein, & Head, 2013).

Although there is no consensus in literature regarding the definition of cyberbullying (Wendt & Lisboa, 2014), it is an addition and a new connotation for the word bullying and its own peculiarities. Thus, cyberbullying can be characterized as manifestations of aggressions by means of electronic devices such as personal computers and cell phones. It takes place by actions of psychological, systematic violence carried out on social networks by means of the posting of text messages, photos, and videos with the intention to cause damage to some other person (Ferreira & Deslandes, 2018; Seixas, Fernandes, & Morais, 2016).

Unlike bullying, in which most of the times violence is restricted into the school premises, cyberbullying is violence shared with an uncountable number of people on social networks and virtual means. Thus, cyberbullying nowadays propagates itself by means of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and it is getting more difficult to prevent and fight against such practices due to the fact that they take place in environments that are not limited by space delimitations. however, many times, these aggressions get started by bullying within the school premises, and then they get transferred to social networks and reach a much larger audience (Wendt & Lisboa, 2014).

Another peculiarity of cyberbullying is the permanent character of the virtual aggressions because the content of the offences can be watched, shared, and archived by any person, any time. Besides that, these forms of aggression can become more intense, since the ones involved in these dynamics can use fake accounts and profiles in order to commit their crime (Azevedo, Miranda, & Souza, 2012). Besides, the practice of cyberbullying via ICTs acquires a flexibility aspect, in which victim and aggressor can more simply realize an exchange of roles. Another aspect related on this practice is the facility with which this tool offers a succession of the violent acts, thus increasing the magnitude of the phenomenon (Azevedo, Miranda, & Souza, 2012).

Lots of children and adolescents have experienced cyberbullying situations according to a study realized with 1534 elementary education students from public schools in different cities around the country. The research pointed out that 37% of the participants had already gotten involved in virtual violence situations. The situations include the sending of messages via cell phone or pc as the most predominant one, followed by attackers pretending to be someone else, threats, and the publication of videos that ridicule people and contain verbal abuse (Stelko-Pereira et al., 2018).

The consequences of these actions can have serious consequences because the mental health of the involved ones gets vulnerable. These individuals most often go thorough depression, social phobia, anxiety, and low self-esteem are other possible effects of the cyberbullying experience (Azevedo, Miranda, & Souza, 2012; Schreiber & Antunes, 2015).

In this scenario, in the year 2018, Law no. 13.663 was created. It altered article 12 of Law no. 9.394 of December 20th 1996 – Law of Directives and Bases and Education, in order to include the promotion of measures to promote awareness, prevention, and the fight against all types of violence, in addition to the promotion of peace culture in schools. Schools have the legal responsibility to approach the cyberbullying set of themes by means of actions that aim at facing the phenomenon.

The role played by the school, which includes the actions of teachers and the whole team of educators, consists of providing students with guidance regarding the responsible, ethical use of technology. It is important to reflect with the students on what they usually post on the web or share on social networks. The students must be informed that postings that carry out messages of prejudice, intolerance, and that do damage to the reputation of classmates might result in legal consequences. In this sense, students must be warned that the crimes practiced virtually and that anonymity and being underage do not exempt these individuals from the responsibility and punishment they incur by committing illicit acts, according to the prescriptions of the Statute of Children and Adolescents (Silva, 2010).

Another document that advocates the prevention of violence situations in the school environment is the new Curricular Common National Base, "Base Nacional Comum Curricular" (BNCC). The document, produced by the Ministry of Education (MEC), has a normative character and intends to provide guidelines for curricula and pedagogical proposals for public and private schools in Brazil. It also promotes the idea that

schools must aim at socio-emotional competences in their curricula. The development of socioemotional competences contributes to students' overall education and it might prevent violence at school (Silva, 2020), as well as cyberbullying.

In this sense, it is of vital importance for teachers to pay careful attention and be prepared to help students deal with cyberbullying situations. Most importantly, students must be also ready to work on the prevention of virtual violence. However, there is a rather consistent barrier towards that objective: teachers feel unprepared and lack the confidence to handle the phenomenon (Lanzillotti & Korman, 2018). Considering the students' continuous formation, all information on cyberbullying, and actions targeting not only teachers but the whole school staff, might contribute with solutions to cyberbullying problems (Almeida, 2014; Lanzillotti & Korman, 2018).

A study realized with 118 university students in Portugal revealed that observing the students' behavior and warning them of the dangers of technologies are two actions that can be developed by the teachers in order to prevent cyberbullying. Despite all these possibilities, students reported the predominant inexistence of strategies by the teachers for fighting against and preventing the phenomenon, which further reinforces the importance of reflecting over these problems in the educational context (Souza, Simão, & Caetano, 2014). In this same perspective, the study by Bozza and Vinha (2017) aimed at analyzing educational programs in the national and international scenario towards interventions for prevention of cyberbullying at schools. It was verified that, all around the world, there are programs developed with the intention to prevent situations of violence in virtual spaces. These programs might be used by teachers, educational technicians, families, and the students themselves. However, such programs are scarce or inexistent in the Brazilian context. In view of the relevance of the theme of contemporaneity, this study aims at getting to know the teachers' conception regarding the cyberbullying phenomenon and the strategies used in the fight against violence situations in the school environment.

METHOD

Outlining and participants

It consists of a qualitative study of exploratory nature. Six teachers from a public elementary and high school in small city in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The inclusion criteria were: participants were supposed to be teachers of elementary or high school in a public institution. There were no exclusion criteria. Three participants were male and three were female. Their ages were diverse and the length of their classroom experience had a scope comprehending a period of over 10 years. At the moment of the interview, four participants were teachers with classroom experience and two were employees from the principal's office and coordination of elementary school.

Instruments

Researchers realized individual semi-structured interviews containing questions that contemplated the teachers' conception on cyberbullying and prevention strategies used by the school in the fight against the phenomenon. A digital voice recorder was used in the gathering of resources, and the participants will be identified by letter "P" followed by a number, which is a means to safeguard individuality and anonymity.

Ethical procedures and aspects

This study is in accordance with the ethical principles of research with human beings, according to resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council, or "Conselho Nacional de Saúde". The project was registered on the Brasil Platform and submitted to the Ethics Committee for Human Beings of a Federal University, which approved the realization of this study by means of CAEE 65897817.5.0000.5346. the interviewees signed the Free Informed Term of Consent. The sample was constituted by convenience, considering that the teachers who were invited to participate in the research belonged to the school the research work with the students had already been realized. The interviews were realized at the school during the time that is usually set aside for meetings with teachers. The interviews lasted 40 minutes in average.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of interviews, content analysis was used according to Bardin (2010). Two categories were selected after analysis of the transcribed interviews entitled: Violence off the school walls: the teacher's perception and actions for preventing and fighting against cyberbullying developed at the school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Violence off the school walls: the teachers' perception

This category approaches the teachers' perception on cyberbullying. It also presents the role played by the school, the possible and necessary interventions in the school environment regarding the phenomenon from the perspective of education professionals.

Most participants in the study reported having witnessed cyberbullying situations involving students of the school. According to the teachers, the cases took place on the social networks via hateful, offensive language, pejorative comments, and image distortions. This can be observed in the speeches: "Yes, I have

heard of situations in the past. I never actually got to read it, but I heard about it. The teachers sometimes comment, right?" (P4), "Yes, yes. We have had problems in the virtual environment, with WhatsApp groups that students create in order to communicate (P5), P3 also remembers having heard from the students:

> Yes, it has happened here, among the students (...) I heard the rumors that photos or comments had been posted on the social network (...) lots of hate and offensive language. The same thing happens in WhatsApp groups and hear the comments, you see. (P3)

After the advancement of technology, cyberbullying is a very frequent phenomenon among the young populations, due to the increasing use of the internet (Wendt & Lisboa, 2014). Based on the reports, it is possible to identify a comprehension by the teachers regarding cyberbullying, which represents acts of psychological, systematic violence on the social networks by means of publications of text messages, photos, videos, and other tools with the intention of causing damage to some other person in a hostile, repeated manner (Brown, Jackson & Cassidy, 2006; Ferreira & Deslandes, 2018; Shariff, 2011). The study by Lanzillotti and Korman (2018) also highlighted the fact that part of the faculty understood the phenomenon and could identify different types of cyberbullying, described in the literature on the topic. The practices include: spreading fake information, or videos containing private, personal information, or the sending of threatening, offensive messages. Thus, it is possible to infer that education professionals are aware of cyberbullying, which might lead to the implementation of actions towards preventing and fighting against the phenomenon.

The interviewed professionals believed that, in view of cyberbullying situations, education institutions should realize interventions. Thus, they pointed out that schools have the responsibility to educate, provide guidance, and raise awareness among students regarding these problems. That can be observed in the following reports:

> I believe that school (...) the most important role played by school is the educational one. So, all the time (...) if something is witnessed at school or if professionals get to hear about any information [on cyberbullying cases] the school must provide guidance and correction so that this problem does not happen in the school premises, you know. (P1)

> I believe that schools have the responsibility to raise awareness. After all, that is the function of the whole team of teachers and staff members. Education professionals must influence in the formation of the students' conscience when it

> comes to learning (...) learning what is right and what is wrong because the line in between is thin (P3).

In the participants view, schools must have clear rules concerning the entrance of electronic equipment such as cell phones and personal computers.

Educational institutions must also take action in raising awareness and prevention even against violence situations that take place via technological devices in the students' social and family context. This data is in accordance with what is expected from school concerning cyberbullying situations. The role played by education institutions regards orientation on the ethical, responsible use of social networks, as well as the legal consequences of the incorrect use of technologies (Silva, 2010). Besides that, computers available at schools must have warnings on the screen for informing the students about what is allowed and what is not allowed within the school environment with the objective of telling the students about ethics and assertive behavior regarding the use of technologies and virtual networks (Goebert et al., 2010; Walker, 2010). The education that the interviewed professionals mentioned can be processed with the help of what Caetano et al. (2016) mentioned as the importance of developing with children and adolescents "effective notions of digital citizenship" (p. 209), based on the conscious, critical, and informed use of contemporary technologies.

All interviewees mentioned the teacher as the most responsible one for providing guidelines on ethics and citizenship to the students. They reported that the teachers are supposed to help prevent violent attitudes by the students by means of classroom instructions and the exhibition of content that approach basic themes and rules for social life and respect for other people's lives. According to Silva et al. (2013), the teachers constitute role models for social behavior for the students. Therefore, the stance teachers take regarding certain situations in the classroom, including violence, influences the students on the way they interact and how they are supposed to react in case of violence against their peers. Thus, it is considered that the position taken by teachers concerning violence situations is a determining factor towards a healthier interaction among the students in their personal and academic lives.

Concerning the interventions that the interviewees considered necessary and possible in the realm of school education and the fight against cyberbullying situations, the highlights are: dialogue with the involved students, communication with family member regarding the situation, dialogue with parents/guardians. In the professionals' perception, the availability of lectures, motion pictures, and plays on the theme are possible alternatives to help the school community fight against

violence. In the interviewees' perception: "I believe that the first intervention should be a conversation. This conversation should involve the aggressor as well as the ones who are suffering the aggression. Report to the parents of the aggressor and of the victim (...)" (P1), "So, it is a conversation with the students, their parents, and their guardians with the intention to fix the problem in the most humane way" (P2), "(...) having this communication parents or guardians means bringing them into the school environment. They also should be protagonists and become more present in the everyday lives of school" (P3), "I believe that lectures, bringing visitors over to talk on the theme, promoting interactions among the students on the theme (...) I believe it helps a lot" (P4), "and I believe that school plays a fundamental role because it can provide lectures, theatrical plays, and motion pictures in order to promote the debate" (P6).

Education professionals pointed at the importance to work together with families and school, which seems to contradict the recommendation by the literature when it comes to violence situations involving children and teenagers (Caetano et al., 2016; Wendt & Lisboa, 2013). According to Arón and Milic (2000), the situations that aim at eradicating violence occasionally involve lectures, capacitation, and discussion groups, but they must prioritize the dedication of the actors involved in the realm of school education, especially the occupation of teaching and learning. Besides that, it is necessary to develop a positive atmosphere at school, as well as a collaboration, mediator culture in which individuals share solutions to their problems. That is, teamwork.

In this sense, it is possible to observe that the actions mentioned by the interviewed teachers prove relevant when it comes to raising awareness and promoting empathy in the interactions among children and adolescents. On the other hand, such awareness does not seem to last long because it depends on the children's social skills and on comprehending children and adolescents in particular. In this sense, it is believed that more effective, long-lasting interventions consist of the development of specific actions tackling the theme. Such interventions are supposed to be developed by qualified professionals. Besides that, they must be carried out periodically and continuously, and they must involve all members of the school community.

Actions towards preventions and the fight against cyberbullying developed at school

This category includes the teachers' knowledge on actions for prevention and the fight against cyberbullying developed at school. It also contemplates their knowledge on the current specific legislation.

Concerning the interventions and actions developed at the school for preventing and combating cyberbullying, the interviewed teachers affirmed that there are no specific projects on the theme. This can be evidenced in accounts such as the following one: "No, we do not have a specific project, like (...) designed for prevention. We just do not have it." (P1), "No, there is no project regarding cyberbullying. There is nothing." (P5), "So, there is no such thing as a neat, written plan for a project. Everything relies on the teachers' everyday work" (P4), "Well, I am not aware of any projects on that theme (...) but what I can say is that this topic is approached in an integrated way, right? When something happens (bullying or cyberbullying), it is discussed in an integrated way among teachers and administration (P3).

The study by Cardoso et al. (2017) on interventions against cyberbullying has highlighted 10 strategies being developed in different countries in the last three years, in order to prevent or face phenomenon in the school environment. The actions were divided into three groups: intervention strategies can be learned and applied by the students themselves autonomously; intervention strategies applied by the member of the school team; and intervention strategies applied by teachers and other professionals. The first group referred to interventions that might be learned and applied by the students themselves by means of psychoeducational videos on cyberbullying. In the second group, the actions consisted of training for parents, teachers, and students on cyberbullying, while including ways to deal with this phenomenon. The first group contemplated connected action in which health professionals trained teachers. The study indicated that despite the current publications concerning interventions towards preventing and combating cyberbullying, there is no instrument or recommended strategy in the literature that might be used as intervention regarding these acts of aggressiveness. The study also pointed at the necessity to invest in studies to develop strategies for combating cyberbullying while improving and validating such strategies for different populations.

Some of the interviewed teachers, in an attempt to justify the violent acts that take place at school, and the absence of continuous interventions for these situations, point at structural difficulties, lack of human resources, scarce investments in capacitation and practically no support by the state. Lanzillotti and Korman (2018), by means of research on the theme, highlighted the fact that teachers lack enough information to intervene in cases of cyberbullying, while emphasizing the need for specific training for efficient intervention in such cases. The authors suggested training workshops, informational leaflets, spaces for consultations, and intervention protocols specifically projected and targeting the offer of information for teachers, and contributions for preventing the

cyberbullying phenomenon.

Based on this scenario, the teachers participated in the present study and highlighted the partnership between schools and universities as a resource for attempts at mitigating violence and as a possibility for the development of preventive strategies in the school environment. In an interviewee's perception, "the psychology course could contribute, in term of formation for these future professionals, by offering internships here at the school" (P2). It is important to consider the fact that the university can develop research works and extension projects aiming at helping schools provide answers to specific necessities and demands, such as the cyberbullying problem. Nevertheless, education institutions have the social and legal responsibility to be protagonists in the fight against violence.

A participant pointed out: "I believe that school plays a fundamental role because it can offer lectures, theater, and movies. It can also invite people like psychologists to talk to the students, you see" (P6). In view of the absence of specific projects on violence prevention, according to the teachers, the school realizes some interventions on cases of cyberbullying, such as: approaching the theme in the classroom, referring students to talk to the principal or to the coordinators; promoting conversations among the students on violence situations, and requiring the presence of parents in order to provide explanations. In this sense, it is important to consider, as an indication of protection, an attitude of supervision and orientation by parents and/or guardians in order to monitor the way children and adolescents use the web, who they have conversations with, how communication takes place and how long they stay online (Wendt & Lisboa, 2013). The interventions mentioned by the teachers are the same ones regarded as necessary and possible for the school environment and for fighting against cyberbullying situations.

In the study by Souza, Simao, and Caetano (2014), the authors highlight the perception of first year university students, three forms of intervention realized by the teachers regarding cyberbullying: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The primary intervention was related to observing the behavior of the students, such as dialoguing, interacting, and providing guidance against the dangers of technology. The secondary one included providing support to the victims of cyberbullying, the search for comprehension of violence situations and the availability of information on necessary measures regarding cyberbullying, and encouraging people to never fail to report to authorities. The tertiary one refers to contacting parents and/or guardians, involving the school community, and counting on professional support. In this sense, it is possible to infer that the teachers who participated in the present study used

some of these interventions, including the three forms. However, in view of the complexity of the phenomenon, interventions cannot be the responsibility of teachers only. Instead, the whole educational institution must get involved, according to the recommendation of Law number 13.663.

Concerning the specific legislation, most of the interviewees verbalized the fact that they have no knowledge regarding the laws on these themes. The lack of knowledge revealed by most of the education professionals might be related to the absence of specific projects for preventing and combating cyberbullying. The referred legislation that started in the year 2018 altered article number 12 of Law number 9.394 from December 20th, 1996 – Law of Directives and Bases for National Education, in order to include the promotion of measures for raising awareness, for preventing and combating all types of violence, and the promotion of a peace culture at the schools. The law does not indicate the forms of action for raising awareness and prevention in the fight against violence. However, it advocates a peace culture. According to Resolution 53/243 of 1999, peace can be promoted in the area of education by means of measures such as: teaching values, attitudes, behaviors, and life styles that lead children to autonomy in the resolution of their own conflicts by peaceful means, while exercising mutual respect, tolerance, and no discrimination.

Studies have pointed at the need to involve the whole school community in actions against violence in the school context (Caetano et al., 2016; Faria & Martins, 2016; Silva, 2010; Wendt & Lisboa, 2013). In addition, they emphasize the importance of continuous actions and the contemplation of information (Lanzillotti & Kormano, 2018; Silva, 2010), as well as the promotion of some skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, self-management, leadership, and proactivity in handling cyberbullying (Caetano et al., 2016).

It is considered that, for facing cyberbullying, the educational institutions need to recognize the existence of the phenomenon, in order to become aware that this type of violence can cause damage to the socio-educational development of students. It is also necessary to provide professional capacitation on the theme (Lanzillotti & Kormano, 2018), the involvement of the whole school community (parents, students, teachers, managers, secretaries, and assistants), and the articulation with organs from the protection network for children and adolescents, as advocated by the ECA (Silva, 2010), which was not mentioned by the teachers who participated in the study, while the phenomenon is regarded only in the school and family realms. Nonetheless, since it is a type of violence that involves children and teenagers, it must be reported to

competent organs, and interventions must be realized in collaboration (Brasil, 1990).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the objectives proposed by the study, it was possible to get to know the teachers' conceptions regarding the cyberbullying phenomenon and the strategies used for combating violence situations in the school environment. It was also possible to identify the vulnerabilities that exist in this context when it comes to effectiveness in the resolution of problems related to violence, in the teachers' view.

Considering what was exposed, it is possible to infer that violence situations are still a problem in school contexts. It is possible to emphasize the importance of initial and continuous formation for professionals that operate directly with the students so that interventions in this aspect can be effective. Actions of this nature were opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge on cyberbullying as a form of violence at school, as well as awareness for the development of better competence in identification, prevention, and interventions on violence themes.

In order to maximize the effect of preventive actions, it is necessary to promote collaborations by diverse sectors inside and outside school. We believe it is fundamental to articulate actions with the state and municipal governments and professionals from the networks of educational and health support, in addition to the school community, parents and students. The continuous formation must be based on legislations number 13.663 of 2018 and number 8.069 of 1990. It must also include information on human development, social skills, and non-violent communication in the search for subsidies for professionals that work directly on the cyberbullying phenomenon. Besides such learning, it is necessary to contribute to the protagonist nature of the school community when it comes to strategies and actions for facing the type of violence that takes place in this scenario, while contributing to healthier, less excluding relations among students.

Thus, it is believed that providing teachers with the tools and capacitation to intervene, and fomenting prevention actions for combating cyberbullying are strategies that are efficient to combat violence in the school context. Likewise, the engagement of all actors in the school community for preventing and combating violence will lead to healthier and more collaborative interpersonal relations, based on the principle of sharing responsibility and participation by everyone.

Cyberbullying is a modern phenomenon which has a considerably negative impact on the lives of everyone involved, especially the victims. Despite the existence of studies aiming at comprehending the complexity of the phenomenon, there is a lot to be investigated regarding strategies for combating cyberbullying. Thus, it is of vital importance that new research works and projects on these themes be realized in school environments while contemplating a greater number of participants in the school community with the objective to obtain a more comprehensive view in the current scenario for the prevention of violence in this context. In addition, it is necessary to elaborate and implement public policies for facing the problem not only as a responsibility of educational institutions.

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